

## Sermon Archive 525

Sunday 2 March, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Caring for the planet - a connected thing

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



### Two Readings:

John 15: 5-7

1 Corinthians 12: 12-20, 26

Jesus presents the idea of the vine with a number of branches. The vine is one living thing, with one root buried deep in the earth, drawing up from the earth everything that it needs - except for light and warmth which comes from the sky above. How well the vine does depends on its being rooted in the earth, and exposed to the sky. But yes, it has a number of branches - each stretching out into different parts of the garden, some looking old and gnarly, some new and fresh - part of the same plant. Some of the branches are just where we want them to be, others growing into the gutterings, where they block the drains or create leaping platforms for the rats to get into the roof. This is the thing with vines - they grow, sometimes in directions we would prefer for them not to take.

Jesus notes, of course, that branches severed from the vine lose all signs of life - well, not just signs of life, but actually life. They might still be reached by the sun, but without connection to the root through the vine, they die. They might not have been rat ramps. They might not have clogged the gutterings. They might have been the pride of the gardener - but if they're separated from the rest of the vine, they wither, they die, and are only to be burned.

Jesus was not interested in vines. He was interested in people. He spoke of vines to say something that needed to be said about humans and humanity. Human beings are not isolated things that have their own life. Human beings are part of a larger thing, from which they draw their

life. What is that larger thing? For Jesus, I think the larger thing was the community of those who were finding faith in God by following him. Expressed in Chapter 15 of John's gospel, it's a referring back to Chapter One, where it's said that to those who believed in him was given the power to become children of God. In faith, in following, they become children of God. The image of the vine, with them becoming the branches, says something about how that process of becoming children of God is never entirely a private one, an individual one. If you are called by Christ, if faith in Christ is a gift you receive, it's not a call to separateness. You become a branch within a larger living thing. There is no private Christian. There are simply branches on a vine.

As soon as you insist on being something other than part of the vine, though you have sunlight and warmth, your life departs.

Protestors might say, "yes, I acknowledge my need of being rooted in Christ - I need the root, but I don't need the other branches. In fact maybe I would grow more easily if the root wasn't nourishing them as well. Maybe Jesus hears them say that, and quietly smiles with a combination of love and concern - that they would stretch the metaphor to the point of selfishness. "'I thank you, God, that I am not like other people — cheaters, sinners, adulterers. I'm certainly not like that tax collector! I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.')

A quickness to distance ourselves from others, then others, then others, then others, until it's only us . . . No there is a vine made up of multiple branches - they **are** a part of the vine.

Matthew Jack, a peddler of religious community would of course say this. He's a community builder - a bloody communist!

-ooOoo-

Paul chips in with another image of unity. It's his metaphor of the community as a human body - many parts, one body. It's like he's had a few years since Jesus spoke to pick up on the idea that some branches of the vine don't welcome the existence of others. Paul knows that each branch in the vine does pretty much what any other branch does. But in the human body, each part of the body has an individualised task to do upon which the whole body relies. The different parts need to be different. They need to attend in their own

way to the greater welfare of the whole thing. And indeed, whereas if one branch is removed from a vine, most of the vine will carry on regardless. The loss is borne solely by the errant part of the vine that went its own way. But with the body, if the liver leaves, it's not just the liver that's going to fail. The whole body will be in trouble.

This is a model that emphasises not just that we have a unity, but that if the unity fails, everything fails. It's death for everyone.

Paul, like Jesus, is talking about the community of Christian faith. So we, in the Christian community of faith receive a call to think this through. In the olden days it might have been the Protestants realising that they needed the Catholics (and vice versa). It might have been how the liberation theologians in South America realised that they needed the anti-communist establishment in other parts of the world. In more recent days, it might have been the Liberals realising that they needed the Conservatives (and vice versa). In more recent days again, it might be the social progressives working out how to live with those who want to remove the rainbow flags from the church. It's easy to chop off a branch and go on regardless. Paul's model of the body reminds us that severing one another is not the quick fix we sometimes imagine it might be - and indeed it might even hurt us who do the severing. Where one part suffers, the whole lot suffers. Great is the suffering while still we cling to the insight that we belong together in the body, in the vine, in the Christ. Maybe the church, before it preaches to the world about global unity and environmental integration, needs to get its own social justice act together.

-ooOoo-

Should the church have got its act together sufficiently to win the right to be heard by the world, let's consider this. Much of the world doesn't care at all about Christian unity. Nevertheless, all of the world has an actual unity with every other part of the world - "we all breathe the same air", we all are warmed by the same sun, we all thirst for the same water. Each living thing is a branch in the global vine. Each is a body part of this thing called "creation". Dare we preach to all the parts a Christian wisdom that talks of severed parts withering and dying, that

talks of any individual body part's fate shared organically by all the other parts?

I consider my burning of petrol here (Hybrid offsets notwithstanding) a kind of private matter. I do not consider Tuvalu feeling nervous about rising sea levels. Wealthy people in the Hollywood hills consider their fires a private tragedy. Their government still doesn't consider the fires a cause to revisit environmental policy. Floods hit New South Wales; that's nothing to do with fires in California. No, no, see we insist on being branches that have nothing to do with the vine. We insist that the liver, the eye, the hand all have separate lives . . .

This Sunday we finish off a series of services themed around "caring". Caring for the church, the city, the country. Caring for one another, caring for the planet. At the end of this series, we find ourselves sitting with two models - Jesus' vine and branches, and Paul's human body. We seem to have come to a place of reflecting on connectedness. Called to care, it's not like we're isolated individuals who may or may not warm to the idea of having neighbours. We **have** neighbours. That's just part of our createdness. We don't really have the option of setting up our own private world. Well, maybe for a little while we can, but eventually the change will come and find us. If we try to do that, then we'll just discover that we've become withered branches that need to be burned - because we no longer have life.

Indeed, we are part of God's world - this living, breathing, non-monstrous thing, that longs for love and nurturing. "Care" is not a concept - it's a relational reality - and a call to those who know that the world is one.

A moment of quiet.