

Easter 5 2nd May 2021

John 15.1-8

Contemplatio: Michael Wood

There are certain passages of scripture that get a bit of a reputation for being used in nasty toxic ways and today's is one of them which is one reason why I'm interested in unpacking it.

The text is part of the three chapters in John's gospel commonly called the 'farewell discourse' in which Jesus lays out some really beautiful and comforting words for his disciples in light of the fact that he's soon going to his death. As well as speaking to those disciples we also need to remember that these verses are written for Christians in every age, particularly if they are facing persecution.

Despite the beautiful intimacy of these verses they can so easily be misused.

One example of this misuse is to use the text as something exclusory text to beat up on non-Christians. In such as mi-reading, the branches which are pruned out of the vine and cast into the fire are non-believers. To try to support such an interpretation, we could do a little mental leap into Matthew's gospel and hear the vaguely threatening voice of John the Baptist where he says, "*His [Jesus] winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire*" (Matthew 3:12).

Another misreading of the text would be to use it to beat up on ourselves by turning it into a morality tale. For example, we might hear... 'if you are not good enough or holy enough in your Christian life then God will prune you out and you'll be burned in fire'.

Either one of these readings do injustice to God and turn God into a monster who looks nothing like Jesus.

So how are we to understand pruning and burning in a way which his consistent with the love of God revealed in Christ – in a way which is consistent with the pattern throughout John's gospel that Jesus did not come to condemn the world but to save the world (John 3:17)

There are three points I want to make here:

First point: God's action in pruning our lives is an act of grace. There is stuff in our lives which is incredibly unhelpful to our wellbeing – whether that be toxic patterns of thinking about ourselves and others, or toxic ways of treating other people. These things need to be cleaned up and if we stay close to Christ – if we remain IN the vine, then we can trust that God will do that cleansing-up process. Jesus says here that it happens simply through being in close vicinity to Jesus and listening to his words. He says to the disciples, 'you are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you' (the word for 'cleaned' and 'pruned' are the same). If you, like me, have a grapevine at home you know how this works. Every year around July we have to give the vine a good cut back of all the old dead stuff, and that gets chucked into the fire (or in our case the compost bin). This is completely necessary for the health of the vine AND in order to get grapes next season – which might incidentally (hint hint) get made into a Eucharistic wine.

Second point: the text never actually says that it is GOD who throws the pruned branches into the fire. The words are in the passive tense – the old dead branches just get chucked in the fire. It doesn't say who does the chucking. Perhaps life does that - or other people – or the violent systems

of this world. But... regardless of how the branches get tossed into the first, let's think for a moment about the recurring symbolism of fire in the Bible. Fire is primarily associated with purification.

To mix up the metaphors a bit, we can legitimately read this image of branches being thrown into a fire as being similar to the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). The younger son rudely and prematurely takes his inheritance from the Father and ends up poor and lonely and eating pig food. That's the equivalent of going through a purifying fire. To misquote an ex Prime Minister of Australia, Paul Keating, this was the 'recession which the younger son had to have'. The only way for the young man to learn was to go through the depths of the consequences of his decisions. It's not necessary to think that God put him there as an act of punishment. It's enough to realise that LIFE does this to us sometimes. There are over a hundred passages in the Bible which refer to God as being like a refining or purifying fire. For example, St Paul says, "*Each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done*" (1 Cor. 3:13). To return to our earlier quote from Matthew, the chaff being thrown into the fire is not a bunch of wicked people, but can be thought of as the chaff of our own lives being pruned, cleaned out, burned away – being refined into more fully human beings.

And this brings me the **third point**, from verse 7, "*if you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish and it shall happen for you*". This is categorically NOT a prosperity gospel. I am NOT being promised a BMW – regrettably. IF we remain in the vine then whatever God wishes will become in us what we wish, and what God wishes is always about love. If we wish for love then we will most certainly receive it, and give it, even when it means crucifixion. When we remain in the vine of Jesus, our fate will be the same as Jesus – loving to the end.

Reflections questions to finish with:

1. How do I experience myself or my church community as abiding in the vine of Jesus? What does that look like for me?
2. How do I experience myself or my church community being pruned?