

NORTH WESTMORLAND WEEKLY

Sunday 28th April 2024 – Fifth Sunday of Easter

Easter

Sunday's readings

Acts 8:26-end

Psalms 22:25-end

I John 4:7-end

John 15:1-8

White

Collect

Almighty God, who through your only-begotten Son Jesus Christ have overcome death and opened to us the gate of everlasting life: grant that, as by your grace going before us you put into our minds good desires, so by your continual help we may bring them to good effect; through Jesus Christ our risen Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Post Communion Prayer

Eternal God, whose Son Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life: grant us to walk in his way, to rejoice in his truth, and to share his risen life; who is alive and reigns, now and for ever.

The Heart of Westmorland
MISSION
Community

Tending the branches of the vine

The image of the vine and the vinegrower has a great many resonances. It teaches that we are only truly fruitful if we abide in Christ. No less significant is the observation that we need refining: God prunes both the fruitful and the unfruitful branches of the body of Christ, the one because it is obstructing growth, the other because it will be more vigorous if trimmed. Every gardener knows that many plants, left alone, will not produce as much flower and fruit as they will if cut back appropriately. Indeed, shrubs that have lost vigour with age can sometimes be completely rejuvenated by what we term 'hard pruning': cutting the plant back to within a few inches of the ground. I am reminded of the similar phenomenon of 'stress-induced flowering'. A plant which lacks water or nutrients may transfer its energies into a last-ditch reproductive effort, flowering for survival in circumstances which might seem wasteful to the casual observer ignorant of the circumstances.

We shouldn't press Jesus' parabolic teaching to the n^{th} degree, but it is clear that he spoke with a good first century understanding of agriculture (or even viticulture). It seems right to draw out the parallels with God's people, the church. Pruning plants is effective because it rebalances their use of energy and resources. A plant derives its energy from stored reserves, water uptake and photosynthesis. If the sum total of its energy is divided between too many growing points, they will be less vigorous than if a few are prioritised by pruning.

We too have a store of energy in our people and our traditions. If we prune that part of our inheritance too hard, we will lose the essence of who we are. If we do no pruning at all, however, we will become like an untended fruit tree: a tangle of branches with our energies dissipated in many different directions, none of which is as effective as God would have it. In our personal lives and in our churches, it can be incredibly difficult to give up something which we have always done. When an activity declines naturally, it can be let go, but there often remains a little bit of life and growth in each ministry, in each branch. This is why pruning takes real courage and insight, and will understandably dismay those who enjoy the fruit of that particular branch. In a sense they are right to resist the pruning: in another context, in another season, perhaps at the expense of other branches, that branch might indeed be more fruitful. When we prune a tree, to follow where the Spirit is leading, we are partly looking for the most promising branches, but we are also looking for the overall shape. We want to follow where God has given the growth, and He will not leave the whole unbalanced, for it is one body. Being church is never easy, but there must be design and intent, not merely surrender to circumstances, or the hostility of the contemporary environment.

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Acts 8:26-end

²⁶ Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷ So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." ³⁰ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹ He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³² Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.
³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth."

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ As they were going along the road, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" ³⁸ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more and went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰ But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

1 John 4:7-end

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹ God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, since God loved us

so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us.

¹³ By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world. ¹⁵ God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶ So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁷ Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ Those who say, "I love God," and hate a brother or sister are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. ²¹ The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

John 15:1-8

¹ "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ² He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³ You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.