

Sermon preached by Rev Chris Moroney at the Healing Service at St. Andrew's Cathedral,
Sydney on Wednesday 21st March 2007. Reading: John 15:1-17
Topic: "The Vine and the Branches"

Tracing the Family Tree

Many people like to find out about their family tree. Sometimes it can be a matter of great study and interest, going back generations. At other times, it can be something that comes out of the blue. I was once in Junee, where a relative died. People started talking about Maurie Moroney, which is my father's name. It turned out that the funeral director had the same name as my dad. When I met him at the funeral, he told me that he had done some study about the family tree. He told me that he found out that many years ago the Moroney family was in Spain. In 1588 the Spanish Armada attacked the coast of England. On board some of the ships were the members of the Moroney family. They apparently were rich and owned and operated some of the ships. When the attack on the English ended in a stalemate the Spanish fleet headed home. Many of the ships were wrecked off the coast of Ireland. Which explains why I always thought that we were of Irish descent.

What is your family background? I guess that for all of us, there are some great moments in our family history and some times which we would rather forget, and may even need to find the grace to forgive those who have behaved badly. We all come with some level of family history. It is an important part of who we are and helps us to understand why we do what we do. It some measure it also helps us to understand why we are more vulnerable than some other people to certain temptations and illnesses, some of which are generational.

Our ancestors

When we come to look at John 15, we note that Jesus says: "I am the true vine." (V1)

This is just one of many "I am" sayings of Jesus in John's gospel.

And they all come with an important background. One thing that they have in common is that the very nature of "I am" is a reflection of the name of God in the Old Testament. Everyone of them is a claim to be God – I am who I am. I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the good shepherd. I am the way, the truth and the life. I am the true vine. In the same way that Jesus' claim to be the good shepherd, makes you ask, in contrast to which "false shepherd".

Here we want to ask: what is the false or failed vine? The answer is that this is where the family tree comes into the picture. In the Old Testament there are many references to the people of God being called a vine which God had planted, expecting fruit.

Psalm 80:8-11 (ESV) Isaiah 5:1-2 (ESV)

The nation of Israel had been created by God from the family of Abraham. They were meant to reflect the character of God. He wanted them to be loving and kind and gracious and honest and true.

They were called to be holy because God was holy. The family records note the occasional shining star, such as Moses the law giver, King David, or the prophet Samuel, or Elijah. But even those who were the best had flaws and faults in their performances. Again and again the family failed to live up to God's expectations. God compares their ungodliness to a crop that has failed.

Isaiah 5:3-7 (ESV)

The corrupt nation needs someone from its midst who will fulfil the potential of the family, who will see the results of God's promises.

Our older brother

Jesus Christ is that family member who is able to succeed where everyone else has failed. When Jesus says: I am the true vine, he is making a very bold claim. He is the faithful family representative. He is the one who will redeem the whole family. He is the one through whom, anyone can join the family, the one through whom alone anyone needs to join the family, to be truly part of the family of God, the people of God. Jesus alone has succeeded where everyone else had failed, and where all of us also have failed. He is the one true Israelite who has kept God's word to the letter. He has been faithful in all things – in words and in deeds. On that basis he is the only one who can offer membership of the

family to others. In that situation Jesus is like our older brother who opens the way for us to be part of the family of God, through faith in Him alone. Our older brother's faithfulness is the basis upon which he can call himself the True Vine.

Our reliable father

Every family tree has its father figure. He is the one who began it all. In this case, our Heavenly Father, has an ongoing role in the development and direction of the family. Our Heavenly Father is the source, the director and sustainer of the family tree. The Father is the one who sent the Son into the world. The Father is the one who cares for the family Jesus said: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. This is the same theme that we saw in Psalm 80 and Isaiah 5. His purpose is to nurture the vine to produce the expected fruit. And it is to God's glory that it does bear fruit. An important question then is this: How do you feel about your family history? How do you feel about God's family history? Do you feel that you are in the family of God? Or do you feel that you are outside the family of God? Can you and I see ourselves as being related to Jesus? How would we describe that relationship? This passage will tell us of the great importance of staying true to Jesus. It is a warning of the danger of coming alongside Jesus, for a short time and then drifting away. Many a young person has gone along to the youth group and said all the right things, only to find themselves being too busy to keep going to church one they got a job, or got married. Many a person has come along to God and cried out to Jesus in prayer for healing or help, and once their prayers were answered they became distracted and disjointed by the cares of the world and just couldn't find the time to keep coming along to church, or to read their bibles, or pray, or even think about the things of God. Since Jesus is the true vine, the access point of life with God at the centre, we must stick with Jesus, remain with Jesus, abide in Him.

1 THE TRUE VINE

Jesus takes up the imagery that is something like a parable. The branches have not life in themselves. They draw their sustenance from the main stem, the solid stock.

The Solid Stock

Jesus is the main man. If we are to be his followers, we can never detach ourselves from him. (V5) We must keep on believing in him, trusting him, following his teachings and being faithful to all that he has said. Notice that it is a mutual relationship – we abide in him and he abides in us.

That is very important, because it means he will never leave us or forsake us or let us down or give up on us. People used to say: If God seems far away, guess who moved. You could say that Jesus needs to be our source of life itself. He will always be there for us. We should never move away from our trust in Him. We see what it means to put our faith in Jesus from verse 3 and 4 and then verse 7

Our disobedience is punishable by death and judgement. We all break God's laws, sometimes deliberately, at other times it is thoughtlessly, but we all do it. And we all come under condemnation. But it is through trusting in the words of Jesus that we can have our sins forgiven, our debt erased and our judgement taken by another. The filthy rags of the record of our life is made clean, white, righteous. The gulf between us and God is bridged. Through Jesus we are justified and reconciled, securely. Thirdly, it is on that basis that we can pray with confidence. There are two conditions: remain trusting in Jesus and remain true to his word when you pray, and God will give you the desires of your heart, the very desires that are shaped and prompted by the word of God.

That is why we put such purpose and power into our prayers. God is reliable and will not let us down. He hears and answers our prayers. We can give testimony to that again and again here at the Healing Ministry.

The Various Branches

But we need to recognize that not all branches on the vine are the same.

They do not all need the same attention. Neither will they have the same yield of fruit.

First of all we have the principle that needs to be established. Since God is the gardener (V2)

Here is a simply truth that should scare us to our boot laces. No fruit, no faith, out onto the scrap heap of life. If we are not growing as Christians, if we are harbouring sin in our lives and doing nothing about it. If we are growing in ungodliness rather than bearing the fruit of the Spirit, then are we really Christians after all? See the warning. The outcome will be disastrous for the person with a false faith. (V6) On the other hand, just because we are trusting in Jesus does not necessarily mean that everything will always go smoothly for us. The very pruning process can seem painful at first. It is only later that we can see how the trials that God put us through strengthened our faith and developed our Christian character. James 1:2-4 (ESV) Romans 5:1-5 (ESV) The struggles that you may be going through today, may be God's way of helping you to grow in the faith as you look to him more and more for strength and healing for wisdom and patience. A faith that is never tested and tried is a faith that can grow slack and cold.

The Expected Fruit

What comes out again and again in this passage is that God is expecting fruit to come from the branches that are attached to the vine. (V8-11)

2 INDIVIDUAL BRANCHES

Private responsibilities. Keep the faith Bible reading and prayer. Daily trust in Jesus – for salvation and for guidance. A personal faith must be private and genuine. This is so much more than following a set of guidelines or ethics. Live the faith day by day. Mutual obligations. Don't feel alone, ever. We are called into a family, into a mutually supportive and mutually dependent society. Learn to love one another, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. (V12-17)