



**BENEDICTUS**  
contemplative church

27 April 2024

**Easter 5 (John 15.1-8)**

**God's good vintage**

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I am currently leading with Jenny Batten what is called a 'life practice program', which is part of Interplay. I love its title 'life practice'. We always say that we are 'practising' meditation, beginning afresh each day, being drawn closer to the Source and paradoxically closer to each other, and perhaps we are practising life too, finding out what works and what doesn't, doing something new, learning new tools and body wisdom practices.

I wonder what is inspiring you at the moment, what practices are giving you life? Some of you have enrolled in the retreat in daily life. That is an opportunity to reflect on your life with a spiritual companion, to receive nurture from some talks on Meister Eckhardt and to spend time with God, spend time in those practices, those experiences that lead you to life, whether it be working in the garden, dancing or cooking or reading a book, singing or composing, watching the footy, playing tennis, or just being in the bush or sitting in the sun. The retreat in daily life invites you to take some space in your daily life to reflect on what is important to you and where God might be in all that. I commend it to you, but what is important about the retreat in daily life is that you do not walk alone, you have a spiritual companion, and there are others who are doing the same thing at the same time. There are lectures to listen to and digest and there are opportunities to speak with others if you would like to. And this retreat not only builds us up individually, builds us up in love, helps us to discern practices that are life-giving for this season of your life, but it also strengthens the bonds, the branches, the leaves, within the Benedictus community, the waterhole, supporting one another so that we can live our life in the world as we are called, being beacons of light and love in

our actions in our communities in our world. The Creative Arts Retreat, the Embodied Listening Retreat, the silent retreats and small group offerings also in their own way nurture the Vine.

I am attracted to the image of community that the vine metaphor in today's reading offers, the nature of connection, of mutuality, with one goal, of producing the fruit of love.

O'Day says 'In the image of the vine there are no free-standing individuals in the community, but branches who encircle one another completely. The fruitfulness of each individual branch depends on its relationship to the vine, nothing else. What matters for John is that each individual is rooted in Jesus and hence gives up individual status to become one of many encircling branches....' (O'Day, quoted here by Stoffregen)<sup>1</sup>

This story is set in the context of Jesus last day where he is wanting to encourage his followers, to give them words of hope. When the gospel writer put it all together it is a time when Jesus' followers are being dispersed and persecuted. It is a tough time where there seems to be little hope, so these words are there to hearten them and us, to assure them and us Jesus presence is in the midst of it all, Jesus in and with us individually and as community with a desire for this presence to be shared more broadly. There is a pruning for a more abundant future and, no matter what happens, God will not abandon us<sup>2</sup>.

As we heard in Holy Week and at Easter Jesus' death is about walking with us through all the ups and downs, walking to the end in love, bearing witness to the truth of God's presence and love which goes beyond the evil and violence perpetrated on Jesus and on so many others in our world today. Resurrection says "yes" to life and "yes" to hope.

Jesus says "I am the Vine and my Father, God is the Vine grower". It is God who plants and tends and now Jesus' followers are grafted into this and enfolding each other, living deeply with nourishment from the soil through the roots of God's love so, literally, in this metaphor Jesus abides

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john15x1.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.davidlose.net/2015/04/easter-5-b-on-being-pruned/>

in those grafted into the Vine. There is a mingling, and intermingling of all so that they are, we are, one, with the purpose of producing the fruit of love, rich and sweet, good vintage wine, or grape juice.

I don't know whether you resonate with this imagery or not. I don't know whether you have spent any time with grapevines, with their bare trunks in winter, with the new shoots in spring, with the forming fruit in summer, with the harvest and yellowing leaves in autumn.

The vine grower's role, that is God's role, is to tend, to fertilise, to prune, all with the aim of increasing the abundance of fruit, cutting away that which is not productive, trimming so the fruit will be full. It is not an image of individual gifts, but of communal working for the common good, no differentiation. We are all in this together, grafted onto the vine, drawing sustenance from the soil.

Life is grounded in community. We are planted with neighbours. Our vines and root systems enmesh. We drink the same water and breath the same air. Jesus taught that you can't love God and not strive to love creation.

Bruno Barnhart writes, *"Abide in me": root yourselves in this central place, and remain rooted here, and my life will flow through you and bear fruit in the world.*<sup>3</sup>

Bill Loader affirms: *The language of abiding in or simply being 'in' is the language of intimacy, almost sexual in tone, but expressing a continuing relationship of closeness.*<sup>4</sup> For John, wholeness is, above all, a relationship with the Godhead.

We are in this together. Wayne Teasdale suggests that *'striving for a common goal, with shared philosophy and values, can make the difficulties of living with others easier. Yet one definition of true community is that it includes individuals who are difficult or even abhorrent. And here is our true challenge as mystics in the world: to create community with those who are so different from us that we feel we have nothing in common with them. As our world becomes smaller, through a growing common culture, the true test of community will be our tolerance*

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.edgeofenclosure.org/easter5b.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MkEaster5.htm>

*for our most profound differences and love for the most challenging among us.'*<sup>5</sup>

A Community, like a vine, is somehow mutually responsible for its members. They have something in common. It may just mean that they live nearby, or rely on the same utilities or are intentional gatherings like this one. Communities may fall and disperse, or grow and deepen around emergencies. ANZAC day insists that we are connected and one's pain and loss affects another's. One's sacrifice affects us all.

('We honour and pay respect to those who have served and continue to serve in our armed services. We also pledge ourselves to the journey of peace... We see in Jesus the shepherd who lays down his life for us, (with us), his friends. And, in his cross, we see a mysterious logic that causes us to pause as we make important decisions in our lives.....The choices we are each called to discern and make are about our entering into that depth of life and the sacrifices that love asks of us', says Jesuit priest Brian McCoy<sup>6</sup>.....)

I invite you to consider for a moment, what communities you belong to. For me, I live in Lyneham, a suburb of Canberra. I am part of our Benedictus contemplative church and I meet with people online each morning and evening for meditation, as well as this service on Saturday evening. I am part of the Interplay community which meets erratically throughout the year for gatherings and play. I am part of All Saint's Anglican Church, Ainslie. I suppose my extended family is Community, and my friendship group. I am a member of The Australian Network for Spiritual Direction and a small online poetry and music group, and contemplative photography group, I meet regularly with a group of spiritual directors, I am friend, sister, stepmother.. priest and I live in relation to earth and her creatures including humanity. Working in the garden and Jesus' teaching of the vine helps me not to panic, but to live into the perspective of our connectedness to one another and to the Holy One.

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<sup>5</sup> from: *The Artist's Rule, nurturing your creative soul with monastic wisdom*, Christine Valters Paintner

<sup>6</sup> (Full text at <https://jesuit.org.au/anzac-day-gift-sacrifice/>)

Malcolm Guite quotes

*John 15:5 I am the vine, you are the branches: They that abide in me, and I in them, will bring forth much fruit: for without me you can do nothing.*

then he offers this poem:

How might it feel to be part of the vine?  
Not just to see the vineyard from afar  
Or even pluck the clusters, press the wine,  
But to be grafted in, to feel the stir  
Of inward sap that rises from our root,  
Himself deep planted in the ground of Love,  
To feel a leaf unfold a tender shoot,  
As tendrils curled unfurl, as branches give  
A little to the swelling of the grape,  
In gradual perfection, round and full,  
To bear within oneself the joy and hope  
Of God's good vintage, till it's ripe and whole.  
What might it mean to bide and to abide  
In such rich love as makes the poor heart glad?<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> <https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/2016/04/11/i-am-the-vine-a-sonnet/>