

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 17th November 2019

John 15: 1 - 17

'I am the vine and you are the branches,'¹ said Jesus to his disciples.

I remember pruning the branches of grape vines in the summer of 1993 when I worked on a Kibbutz in Israel. They needed pruning; they were a knotty tangle shooting from trunks that stretched in long rows in the vineyard.

We worked for weeks pruning those vines; starting early on cool, almost frosty, mornings in dry fields under cloudless skies before the sun really started to blaze. The days were long. On my first day, in the early morning, my very first encounter with a vine was to put my hand in to it to start pruning – and I pulled out a shed snakeskin. I felt lucky that it was just the skin, but then I realised I had hours, and days, and weeks of pruning ahead of me.

You never know what you might pull out when you stick your hand in to the overgrown, tangled branches of an ancient grape vine.

'I am the vine and you are the branches.' We are the branches; we are, the Church, the body of Christ on earth, and we are old and tangled. We are old, the Church of Scotland is 459 years old, and the branches of the Church stretch into every part of Scotland, everywhere: branches of history, culture, theology, the arts, education, social care.

Individual congregations of the Church, too, are branches growing off a vine in a tangle of clubs, and groups, and committees, and services, and relationships.

Individual members of the Church, as well, are their own branches - a tangle of beliefs, actions, involvement, friendships, personality.

Stick your hand in to any of those tangles of branches over the years, and of course every so often you might pull out a snake. No person, measured over the years of his or her life, is perfect; no congregation, measured over the decades of its life, is pure; no institutional Church, measured over the centuries of its existence, is wholly holy.

'I am the real vine, and my Father is the gardener. Every barren branch of mine he cuts away; and every fruiting branch he cleans, to make it more fruitful still.'²

I suppose there is always pruning to be done in ourselves, in our congregations, in our Church. Not for no purpose. I didn't stand out in the fields of Israel under the searing sun trying to conquer my fear of snakes for the fun of it. I did it so that the branches of those vines would bear fruit.

That needs to be remembered, because too often when we encounter people, or congregations, or institutions, we think of only of our fears; we imagine only the presence of a few snakes, and don't see or can't imagine the fruit that these branches might be bearing, or are already laden with.

'I am the vine, and you are the branches. He who dwells in me, as I dwell in him, bears much fruit...'³

¹ John 15: 5

² John 15: 1 - 2

³ John 15: 5

Despite its long, entangled history – perhaps because of it - the Church of Scotland bears fruit. Did you know that the Social Care Council of the Church of Scotland, which operates under the name CrossReach, is, apart from the state, the largest provider of social care in Scotland? It has a budget of over £50 million and has been at the forefront in providing social care in Scotland for 150 years. Just to take one example of its long and pioneering work, in 1983 it opened Williamwood House in Netherlee in Glasgow, which was the very first care home in Scotland for people suffering from dementia.

It is a shame that when people outside the Church – and inside - think or talk about the Church, they think and talk too much about the snakes: decline, schism, no young people. When you see the branches of a vine, it isn't always easy to see the fruit.

'No branch can bear fruit by itself, but only if it remains united with the vine.'⁴

Back in 1869 the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland formed a committee – another concept for which the Church is often criticised – called The Committee on Christian life and Work. That Committee was extraordinarily fruitful. As well as the organisation that today we know as Crossreach, it also formed Life and Work Magazine in 1879, still going strong today; the Woman's Guild was established by that Committee in 1887; we call it the Guild today. Just a couple of weeks ago we heard how strong the Guild is in this congregation.

Seven years before the Women's Guild was established, in 1880, the Committee on Christian Life and Work set up the Young Men's Guild - since pruned.

Young men aside, what that Committee did has proved astonishingly enduring and successful. It has benefited so many people's lives probably because the Committee on Christian life and Work recognised that, for Christians, faith has to be about both life and work. How we understand ourselves, our lives, the world and the universe around us is not just a matter of what we believe, but of what fruit those beliefs produce. Does what we believe sustain life and help it to feel both abundant and touched by eternity?

'If you dwell in me, and my words dwell in you, ask what you will, and you shall have it.'⁵

The thing about CrossReach, apart from being the biggest provider of social care in Scotland outside the state, is the range of care it provides. When it comes to CrossReach, whatever Scotland asks for, it shall have it.

Care homes for people suffering dementia are common today, and CrossReach is still in that business, but CrossReach is one of the only charities in Scotland that is able to say it walks with and supports people from their earliest years to their golden years: people with dementia; people with mental, physical or learning disabilities; children living in poverty; those with drug or alcohol dependencies; homeless people; older people in all sorts of situations in life.

'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Dwell in my love.'⁶

CrossReach supports, loves and cares for over 10,000 people each year, regardless of their faith or background. But, it's not about numbers, it's about the real individuals behind these numbers, those who turn to CrossReach when times become challenging. Here's Mairi Baker's story,

⁴ John 15: 4

⁵ John 15: 7

⁶ John 15: 9b, c

I arrived at Rainbow House with a few basic belongings and the firm belief that two weeks would be enough to 'sort myself out'. The first week was a blur but slowly I was coaxed out of my shell by staff and pears. I think I had forgotten what it was like to have a conversation, to laugh with someone, to sit down and eat a meal. I worked closely with my keyworker and came to see the reality of my addiction. Today, thanks to the grace of God, the fellowship of AA and the people from CrossReach, I have the privilege of working at the Whiteinch Move-On service.

Rainbow house is an example of one of CrossReach's centres that helps people who are dependent on drugs or alcohol. It's in Glasgow. It opened thirty-four years ago. Whiteinch Move on Service in Glasgow aims to help people sustain a lifestyle free from drugs and alcohol, and to become active and contributing members of society. They offer a furnished flat to live in, practical support to help people get back on their feet. CrossReach journeys with people step by step, from one service to another.

'This is my commandment love one another, as I have loved you.'⁷

Scotland in the 21st century is a vine made up of a tangle of branches stretching back centuries: historical, social, cultural, political, religious, geographical, demographical, linguistical. It is in so many ways a fruitful country. If we in the Church of Scotland have a habit of talking about the snakes and not seeing the fruit, in Scotland there's a habit of not seeing the snakes and talking only of the fruit.

There are many snakes. Here's one that could bite anyone in Scotland today, loneliness. 11% of adults in Scotland often feel lonely and 38% feel lonely sometimes. 22% of people in Scotland feel they don't have a strong sense of belonging in their local community. 8 out of 10 carers have felt lonely or socially isolated as a result of looking after a loved one. 200,000 over 65-year olds have not had a proper conversation with friends or family for a month.

Because it works throughout Scotland, nationally, and with every age range and segment of society, CrossReach knows a lot about the problems of loneliness and isolation, and the effects of this on people's physical and mental wellbeing.

It's *Join up the Dots* campaign is a partnership with the Guild – bringing together these two organisations, which were born from the same committee back in 1869. Like CrossReach, the Guild also works nationally, and is well placed to know about problems of loneliness locally.

The Project will develop radical new solutions to the problems that CrossReach and the Guild will jointly identify. For example, it will offer a digital counselling service that allows those isolated in rural communities and sprawling suburbs to access care and support remotely, and a new style of residential care home where those living a cut-off life can enjoy the same quality of on-site amenities and services as the residents.

Join up the Dots is being supported by our own Guild here at St. Ninian's this year, and as you leave the service this morning you too can donate to its work in the retiring collection if you wish to.

The Church of Scotland wants the people of Scotland to love each other, as Christ loves it, and them, and has been working to help people do this through just one of its organisations,

⁷ John 15: 12

CrossReach, for 150 years. 'This is my commandment: love one another, as I have loved you. There is no greater love than this... You are my friends if you do what I command you.'⁸

⁸ John 15: 12, 14