

Sermon Archive 199

Sunday 29 April, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: John 15: 1-8

Preacher: Rev. Dr. Ken Booth



Pruned or Crushed?

I grew up in a relatively simple home in Invercargill, and the lounge was an all-purpose family room in which everything happened that wasn't associated with eating or sleeping. In a corner of the room was a key item that belonged to my mother. It was her embroidery frame. Mum always had something on the go, and when other things called, the needle would be put into the backing cloth and a protective cover put over the frame till the next opportunity. She would sit where the light coming in from the window was best and ply her craft.

While I was in the third and fourth forms, most of her work was embroidery for the new church being built around the corner where we went twice on a Sunday. Dad was organist and choirmaster and I was a chorister. While I was at primary school, our church was a simple wooden hall, unlike the fine brick Presbyterian church up the road. Then the Anglicans got their act together and built a new church on the vacant section beside the hall.

Internal decoration in Anglican churches can be quite elaborate, and one of Mum's major pieces was a set of frontals for the communion table in the colours of the seasons of the church's year: white for Christmas and the Easter season; purple for Advent and Lent; red for Pentecost and all those saints who came to a sticky end; and green for the rest of the year, now called Ordinary Sundays for reasons I've never fathomed. Over the seasonal frontals there was a superfrontal, a long strip at the top with two vertical panels. On the strip and the panels were the heraldic shields of the twelve apostles, linked by a vine with bunches of grapes. The vine of course echoes our reading from John's Gospel, with Jesus as the vine and the disciples as the branches.

The vine and branches is an appealing picture of the way the life of Christ is to flow in and through us. In some ways it feels quite comforting and encouraging. But that only obscures the fact that of those apostles represented in the twelve shields almost all of them came to sticky ends, in some cases very unpleasantly. It does not make being a disciple of Jesus much

of a recommendation for prosperity and an easy life. It leads to a much more sobering reflection on grapes and vines. The vines get severely pruned to encourage growth, and the grapes get crushed to make wine. Here's your choice: pruned or crushed? It leads me to ask, Do you have any other options?

At a later stage of my life, I took on the task of editing a book called *For All the Saints*. It is an introduction to the lives of all the figures commemorated by NZ Anglicans in the course of the year. It was one of the most rewarding tasks I have ever done and some of the stories are sobering reminders of the cost of loving. Most of the people in the book are safely buried in the mists of time where they do not confront us too sharply, but one of the most moving stories comes from last century.

Rajmund Kolbe was born in 1894 in Poland. At the age of 16 he became a Franciscan Friar, taking the name Maximilian. Although suffering from tuberculosis, Maximilian did not let that hinder his dreams of a spiritual militia to combat what he saw as the evils of the day. The Militia Immaculatae was given papal approval in March 1919. In 1919 Maximilian became professor of church history at the Cracow seminary. He established a press to keep members of the Militia informed, and the publishing venture became a huge success. By 1927 the presses had moved to Warsaw, and the friary grew. By 1936 Maximilian was head of what was now one of the largest friaries in the world, with over 700 friars.

In 1939 Germany invaded Poland. As far as possible Maximilian dispersed the friary for safety reasons. They took in refugees. The German army closed the friary in September 1939 and detained some of the friars. They were released in December and engaged in helping the numerous refugees and the sick from the fall of Warsaw. The refugees included Poles and Jews.

Maximilian began publishing again, and, given that some of the material published was critical of the Third Reich, it came as no surprise when he was arrested in February 1941. He was taken first to Pawiak in Warsaw. He ministered to his fellow prisoners and suffered abuse at the hands of his guards. In May he was taken in a group of 300 to Auschwitz. Maximilian again ministered to the other prisoners, always sharing his rations, and offered himself to be beaten in the place of others.

At the end of July 1941 a prisoner escaped from Auschwitz. The camp commandant instituted the usual reprisal: ten prisoners were to be starved to death in an underground bunker. One of the selected victims was Franciszek Gajowniczek. At that moment, Maximilian stepped forward and said, "I am a Catholic priest. I wish to die in place of that man; I am old; he has a wife and children." Surprisingly, the German officer accepted the exchange, and Gajowniczek eventually survived to be present at the Vatican in 1982 when

Kolbe was canonised. Maximilian Kolbe was one of the last of the ten to die, being finally despatched with an injection by a camp doctor on 14 August 1941.

For grapes to become wine they have to be crushed. Actually, the reading from John's Gospel doesn't mention that the grapes get crushed. What it does say is that unfruitful branches get pruned. It doesn't make discipleship sound like much of a choice does it? Do you want to be pruned or crushed? And "Neither, thanks all the same", is not an option!

Pruning is something all gardeners have to do from time to time, and I'm told that autumn and winter when the plants are dormant is the best time to do it. Even then, the pruning comes in at least two varieties. There is the proper gardener's way, which is preceded by a careful appraisal of the plant, followed by a judicious snip here and a snip there. Then there is the man's way. "Gimme the chainsaw."

Offered a choice between being pruned or crushed, the better option is to be crushed, because out of that comes the possibility of wine. For most of us "crushing" is too strong a word. We are not called to be Maximilian Kolbes, but if we have lived at all we have received some knocks and bruises along the way that have been an essential part of making us who we are. It is the bruises of life that turn us into the rich and full-bodied wine that we can become. At times that can even feel as though they are out to get you; that you are being shot at. But it is how we respond to what life throws at us that will determine the kind of people we become, the kind of wine we become. Looking around the world, it seems to me that some wine is simply vinegar. Do we grow a protective shell and bitterly rail at life and fire off belligerent tweets? Do we strut the podium as a strong man to reclaim our nation's place in the world? Do we subdue the people with a show of strength and stories of how evil the world is? Do we protect our power and privilege at almost any cost, including chemical weapons? What does it take to open our arms in embrace rather than close our hands into fists? What does it take to become a fine wine rather than vinegar?

We are not in the position to be despots on the world stage, but how we respond to what life throws at us will still determine whether we make the wine of real community or the eyeballing of competitors. We can pretend that what happens around us doesn't affect us, and we can develop protective shells to avoid the things going on around us, to avoid being got at, but life has a way of getting to us. And if we are to grow as children of God and followers of Jesus, then we need to face these challenges and let them enrich us rather than embitter us.

In his "Jerusalem Daybook", James K Baxter told a kind of a parable that is not about

pruning or crushing, but still invites us to openness. It is about the way vulnerability and openness to what the world throws at us is a vital part of becoming truly human. It is a fitting point at which to end this reflection on pruning and crushing only a few days after ANZAC Day.

A certain man decided that life was too hard for him to bear. He did not commit suicide. Instead he bought a large corrugated iron tank, and furnished it simply with the necessities of life – a bed to sleep on, books to read, food to eat, electric light and heating, and even a large crucifix hung on the wall to remind him of God and help him to pray. There he lived a blameless life without interruption from the world. But there was one great hardship.

Morning and evening, without fail, volleys of bullets would rip through the walls of his tank. He learnt to lie on the floor to avoid being shot. Nevertheless, he did at times sustain wounds, and the iron walls were pierced with many holes that let in the wind and the daylight, and some water when the weather was bad. He plugged up the holes. He cursed the unknown marksman. But the police, when he appealed to them, were unhelpful, and there was little he could do about it on his own.

By degrees he began to use the bullet holes for a positive purpose. He would gaze out through one hole or another, and watch the people passing, the children flying kites, the lovers making love, the clouds in the sky, the wind in the trees, and the birds that came to feed on heads of grass. He would forget himself in observing these things.

The day came when the tank rusted and finally fell to pieces. He walked out of it with little regret. There was a man with a gun standing outside. "I suppose you will kill me now," said the man who had come out of the tank. "But before you do it, I would like to know one thing. Why have you been persecuting me? Why are you my enemy, when I have never done you any harm?" The other man laid the gun down and smiled at him. "I am not your enemy," he said. And the man who had come out of the tank saw that there were scars on the other man's hands and feet, and these scars were shining like the sun.

As we reflect on the cost of discipleship, let us accept the inevitability of the bruises and crushing that will come, simply because we are alive and open to the world, but let us also pray that these things will enlarge our love for God's world, through our connection to the vine of Christ. May we become gospel wine.

The Knox Church website is at: <http://www.knoxchurch.co.nz.html> . Sermons are to be found under News / Sermons.