



ST JAMES AYR – SUNDAY REFLECTIONS – 28 April 2024

Introduction



A warm welcome to this week's Sunday Reflection, as we think about bringing good fruit

Please do consider sharing this document if it is safe for you to do so.

INTIMATIONS

5 May: coffee after church

11 May: rummage sale/coffee morning

18 May: Prayer for Peace and fundraiser for Ukraine from 11 am at St James

26 May: Pentecostal lunch

Please join me now for prayer and reflection

Call to worship

The prophet Zachariah says :

For there will be peace for the seed: the vine will yield its fruit, the land will yield its produce and the heavens will give their dew; and I will cause the remnant of this people to inherit all these things. (Zach 8, 12)

Hymn:

Childrens' Talk : I am

Hymn:

Prayer and Lord's Prayer

Let us pray

Loving God,

You are the vine and we are the branches, without you we cannot bring good fruit, without you your church will wither and die, but when we put our trust in you we can prosper and bring good fruit, when we trust in you, your kingdom will come and so we come to you in faith and with hope and we pledge our lives to you.

Gracious Father,

We thank you for your promise to guide your people onto the path that you have intended for them, a path that is paved with love and care towards each other, a path where justice and righteousness are the signposts to your kingdom, a path that leads to you.

We thank you for your son Jesus Christ who came into the world to show us the way to you, who is the way, the truth and the life, through whom we come to the father, who is the true vine through whom we bring good fruit

We thank you for your Holy Spirit, through which you guide us and encourage us to follow your path, to be your son's disciples in our life here and now, in our corner of the world, so we can bring good fruit in your name and in your son's.

Loving God,

You have called us to be your vine, to bring good fruit, but there are times when we feel helpless and overwhelmed, when we do not

know where to go and how to serve you. Help us to entrust our lives to you, so we live as you have intended us to live.

You have called us to love you and to love one another, but there are times when we find it hard to care, hard to forgive, hard to make the first step. Our views are entrenched and we do not want to give way. Help us to live our lives in service to you and to one another, we pray.

Gracious Lord

We know that we are human and frail, but we also know that your son came to save us and to lead us towards your kingdom, and in this trust we pray to you as Jesus has taught us to pray.

Our father, who art in heaven,

Hallowed be Thy name, thy kingdom come

Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread

and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors

and lead us not into temptation

but deliver us from evil

for Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. AMEN

Hymn:

READINGS

Psalms 22, 22- 31

I will tell my people what you have done; I will praise you in their assembly: ²³ "Praise him, you servants of the LORD! Honour him, you descendants of Jacob! Worship him, you people of Israel! ²⁴ He does not neglect the poor or ignore their suffering, he does not turn away from them, but answers when they call for help." ²⁵ In the full assembly I will praise you for what you have done; in the presence of those who worship you I will offer the sacrifices I promised. ²⁶ The poor will eat as much as they want; those who come to the LORD will praise him. May they prosper forever! ²⁷ All nations will remember the LORD. From every part of the world they will turn to him, all races will worship him. ²⁸ The LORD is king, and he rules the nations. ²⁹ All proud people will bow down to him; all mortals will bow down before him. ³⁰ Future generations will serve him; They will speak of the Lord to the coming generation. ³¹ People not yet born will be told: "The Lord saved his people."

John 15,1-17

"I am the real vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He breaks off every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will be clean and bear more fruit. ³ You have been made clean already by the teaching I have given you. ⁴ Remain united to me, and I will remain united to you. A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it can do so only if it remains in the vine. In the same way you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me. ⁵ "I am the vine, and you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me. ⁶ Those who do not remain in me are thrown out like a branch and dry up; such branches are gathered up and thrown into the fire, where they are burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, then you will ask for anything you wish, and you shall have it. ⁸ My Father's glory is shown by your bearing much fruit; and in this way you become my disciples. ⁹ I love you just as the Father loves me; remain in my love. ¹⁰ If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. ¹¹ "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹² My commandment is this: love one another, just as I love you. ¹³ The greatest love you can have for your friends is to give your life for them. ¹⁴ And you are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ I do not call you servants any longer, because servants do not know what their master is doing. Instead, I call you friends, because I have told you everything I heard from my Father. ¹⁶ You did not choose me; I chose you and appointed you to go and bear much fruit, the kind of fruit that endures. And so the Father will give you whatever you ask of him in my name. ¹⁷ This, then, is what I command you: love one another.

REFLECTION

Let us pray for the Holy Spirit

Loving God,

You have called us into your service to bear good fruit, you have sent your son Jesus Christ to be our light on the way towards you, so we can do our part in building your kingdom, in building a world as you have intended it. As we now hear your word we ask that you might send your Holy Spirit to us, so we are encouraged to live as you want us to live.

For this we ask in Jesus' name. AMEN

Years ago my daughter's childminder introduced me to a music group called Santiano. The term santiano, originally Italian, is used by sailors all over the world to describe the longing for freedom and adventure that is only found on the open sea. And so, the music group santiano also performs mainly sea shanties – slightly modernised - and traditional songs of island nations such as Ireland. Here in Scotland they are mainly known for their collaboration with Nathan Evans, that postie from Airdrie, who became an internet sensation with his “Wellerman” shanty back in 2021 during the pandemic. You may remember our own “Wellerman” nativity version back then.

But that is not the song I want to talk about today. Long before that Santiano released a self-written sea shanty called “God must be a sailor”. That is strange. That lets me pause and think for a while. That is quite different from the Biblical images we are familiar with, the good shepherd or the light of the world. And yet, to me it is quite appealing: Because when you have a closer look at the chorus, it does make sense. The chorus has the repeated line “no-one gets lost”, for example. Now that is a bit like the good shepherd who goes after a lost sheep. And my favourite line of the song is: “he will never abandon the crew”. The song is about freedom in community “the

crew” and it is about connection, connection to God and connection to each other. And I thought, yes, why not, the image of God as a sailor, as a captain maybe, makes much sense and in coastal Ireland or Scotland it may be just as relatable as the image of the good shepherd we talked about last week.

It may even be more relatable than the image of the vine and its branches that is the central theme of our New Testament Reading today. And it is appropriate: Jesus always used images that people could relate to, that were part of their daily experiences, that they could see with their own eyes. And beautiful as Scotland or Ireland or Northern Germany for that matter are, vines are hard to find and vineyards hardly part of our environment.

And yet: the two images have something in common: they are about relationship, about connections. “A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it can do so only if it remains in the vine. In the same way you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me”, Jesus explains and unlike the other gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke, John does not let his audience figure the meaning out for themselves. He makes it crystal clear what that means: “Remain united to me, and I will remain united to you”. That is the way to bear good fruit, it is as simple as that: stay united to Jesus, stay connected to him.

And to stay connected to Jesus means to stay connected to one another. Jesus makes that clear, too when he says: “This, then, is what I command you: love one another”, that too is the way to bear good fruit and it is equally simple. To bear good fruit then requires two things: to stay connected to God and Jesus and to stay connected to each other as individual branches of one and the same vine. Or in more familiar words: to love God and through him Jesus with all our soul, with all our mind and with all our strength and our neighbour as we love ourselves.

That will be easy when we are with our friends, with the people we sit next to or behind in our pews, with the people we are close to and

socialise with outwith the church. It is a lot more of a challenge with the people we do not like as much or with those we do not know as well. And of course that will be the case when thirty or forty people come together on a Sunday. They will not always agree, they will have different personalities. That in itself is not a bad thing, it would be a sad world if we were all the same, if we had the same opinion about everything. The question is whether we remain connected, whether we will still be able – to remain with the Nautic image – to steer the ship, our congregation, into the harbour, because that we cannot do on our own, no-one can, that needs a crew, that needs every single branch on the vine in order to reach our destination, in order to bear good fruit.

If we cannot do that we will be shipwrecked. And Jesus is quite brutal about that: “Those who do not remain in me are thrown out like a branch and dry up; such branches are gathered up and thrown into the fire, where they are burned”. That sounds harsh, that is not the message of nobody is getting lost, that is difficult to reconcile with the image of the good shepherd who goes back for the one lost sheep. It does not sit easy with me, it sounds as if we are asked to give up on those dried up branches. But let us be fair. Let us walk a mile in the shoes of John and his congregation: They had it tough, they were cast out of the synagogue, out of the established congregation, because they were more inclusive, because they welcomed the stranger, the gentile, the Greek into their midst. It changed their culture and their tradition so much, that their home congregation did not recognise them any more and as a result they were accused of not honouring established traditions, they were isolated, marginalised, shown the door. No wonder, they hit back, no wonder, they became a bit sharp and it is important to bear that in mind before we judge who is and who is not a burnt branch, a lost cause. Let us not forget that Jesus also said that we are not to judge, so we ourselves are not judged. Who is and who is not lost, is for God and not for us to say.

And yet, we cannot sugar coat it: Our Bible reading makes it clear: those who turn their back on Jesus and God, those who do not love one another, are like the branches that need to be pruned and cut out, so other branches can thrive again. Those who do not want to be united with God and Jesus, those who do not want to be united with each other in love as Jesus has commanded, those who do not want to be part of the crew, are of no use, are thrown out – that is not a judgement, that is a decision, the decision not to be a part of the vine, not to bear good fruit , the decision not to be connected. We can do nothing but respect such a decision, the judgement is God's. And our God is a God who seeks out the lost, who rejoices over those who turn back, our God is a God who forgives, a God of second and third chances.

Our Old testament reading, psalm 22 praises God for exactly that, when he says: "People not yet born will be told: "The Lord saved his people." The psalmist's confidence in a God who saves, in a God who answers when his people call for help, in a God who is there for the poor and the marginalised, a God who is there for everyone, from every corner of the world, is unshakeable. He is happy to bear witness to his faith: "In the full assembly I will praise you for what you have done; in the presence of those who worship you I will offer the sacrifices I promised", he pledges and he can be this confident because he has the connection to God that Jesus speaks of. He has an intimate relationship to the God he addresses directly, he has an infallible trust in him.

And it is this trust, this connection that is God's offer to all of us, to all nations from all parts of the world, that is God's offer, God's gift to us. And in accepting this gift, in seeking this connection to God through Jesus Christ and to each other, we will all bear good fruit.
AMEN

Hymn:

INTERCESSION

Loving God,

You have chosen us to be the fruit of your vine, you have made us your son's disciples to serve you and each other. We thank you that you have entrusted us with this responsibility and in gratitude for your trust in us we lift up to you all those who are in need of your love and our service.

As war still rages in Europe, in the the Middle East and in parts of Africa, we pray for all who are caught up in the conflict of the powerful, a war that is not their own, we pray for the widows and the orphans, for all who have no choice but to fight. May you quell their fears and dry their tears.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer

As scientists look with worry on heavy floods and scorching heat across Europe and the world we pray for your earth and all your creatures that live on it. As sea levels rise and deserts appear we pray for people and animals most vulnerable to the changes. Help us to preserve and protect your creation, we pray

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayers

While we look with horror on tragedies across the Mediterranean sea and on our shores, pray for all who have to flee their country, because they are not safe in Sudan, in Eritrea, in Afghanistan and we pray for the governments of the West, so they decide on the fate of the most vulnerable with wisdom and compassion.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayers

We continue to pray for everyone in our congregation and in our community, We pray for all who need a smile or a friendly word, we

pray for the bereaved, for the sick, for the lonely, for everyone who looks to the future with anxiety and dread. May we be able to bring your love to them

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayers

For all this we pray in Jesus' name. AMEN

We prepare for the dedication of the offering

Dedication

Loving God,

You have called us to be the branches of your vine, you have called us to bring good fruit. We are thankful for this trusting relationship you offer to us and in gratitude for your love to us we bring to your table some of what we have and we dedicate ourselves and our gifts to you. We ask humbly that you may bless these our offerings so they bring good fruit and help spread your gospel where it is needed.

For this we pray in Jesus' name. AMEN

Hymn:

Benediction

And the God who calls us into his service guard you and guide you in this coming week. And the almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us all, now and forevermore. AMEN

