

It was about 9 am when the Senior Steward telephoned. Was I going to be in Church this morning and if so could I take the service? – Our Minister had managed to get a steroid cream in his eye and was now on his way to accident and emergency.

There was only one problem – it was the first Sunday in January!

A quick telephone conversation with the organist playing that morning and we agreed that the Covenant Service could go ahead but there would be no Communion. Then, we had a thought. Was one of our Supernumerary Ministers going to be in the congregation? Another phone call confirmed that he would be there. He suggested though that I should conduct the whole of the Covenant Service, including Communion!

I remember my reply: “I know it wouldn’t offend you and it wouldn’t offend me BUT”

We agreed that he would do what was necessary in the Communion service - the minimum he said!

Then of course there was the question of an appropriate Sermon, with little time for thought let alone preparation. In the 1936 “Book of Offices” and the 1975 “Methodist Service Book” the Gospel reading for the Covenant Service is the opening of John 15. In the 1999 “Methodist Worship” this passage is one of two possibilities.

John 15: 1-10 (NIV) - The vine and the branches

¹ *I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes^a so that it will be even more fruitful. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴ Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.*

⁵ *I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.*

[⁹ ‘As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. ... Verses 9-10 added to reading in “Methodist Worship”]

Footnotes:

John 15:2 *The Greek for he prunes also means he cleans.*

Fortunately, these words of Jesus, give a very strong picture and on that particular morning, as now, I was able to develop the reading with appropriate illustration. I hope these illustrations are helpful as we look at the passage.

For three years between 1976 and 1979 Jackie and I were teaching at Cranbrook School in Kent and living in Staplehurst, a drive of about 6 miles to school and again home at the end of the day. To the side of one straight stretch of road was an extensive orchard. When I first saw it I recognised “proper”, full-size apple trees – trunk and branches all growing from the same original seed. At the end of the three years, the orchard had a completely different appearance – the old trees had been removed and in their place were row after row of small, compact bushes. I remember reading at that time about the East Malling Research station where investigation and development had produced the ideal root stock for apple trees. The fruiting branches were grafted onto this root stock – purchased trees produced a particular variety of apple but all had at their heart the same root stock. I also remember, about this time seeing an advert. (in the Radio Times?) for an apple tree that produced different varieties of apple on the different branches!

The apple trees of Kent are a vivid illustration of what Jesus is saying in John’s Gospel:

“I am the Vine, you are the branches”

Each one of us have our individual characteristics – like varieties of apple or grape – but as branches will only fruit if we remain grafted into the root stock, the Vine that is Jesus.

Grafting into Jesus is not, however, the end of the matter. Jesus says He is the Vine, we are the branches, but His Father is the Gardener. As Gardener he cuts out dead branches and prunes fruiting branches to make them more fruitful.

As keen gardeners will know, different plants require quite different pruning schedules. Some plants require no more than a gentle trim after flowering; others a more extensive cut-back of new growth and some may need radical pruning, back to near ground level.

Jesus said to His disciples:

“..... every branch that does bear fruit he (His Father) prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.”

The question is:

Which type of plant am I? How much pruning do I need to be fruitful?