

John 15:1-10

Growing together in Christ

Gardening

Gardening is certainly not my strongpoint! You cannot begin to imagine how pleased I was when I learned from a colleague in Aberdeen that she had been speaking to a certain gentleman from Montrose at a funeral, who said that he'd been helping to keep the manse garden in order during the vacancy and wondered whether she thought that the new minister would like him to continue. She seemingly replied – I'm sure he would. Never a truer word was spoken – and I'm grateful for all the effort over the years – and Radley looks forward to seeing his friend on a Monday morning! But one of lessons that I've learned from Bill is the benefits of pruning. I'm not talking about a wee bit of trimming back at the edges, but really cutting back, in order to encourage good healthy new growth. I'll confess to wondering in the early years whether he might not have been a bit too ruthless in cutting back the hedge, bushes, trees and the roses in particular but he knew what he was doing and sure enough, in due time the various bushes grew, budded and blossomed as they have each year. Pruning is a lesson for life, which we'll come to a little later.

Regular work in the garden pays dividends. Leave it too long and you're creating a lot of extra work. Keep at it regularly and steadily and you will save yourself a lot of trouble. Another lesson from the garden that applies to life.

And a third lesson is that a beautiful garden usually means that a hard working gardener has worked hand in hand respecting nature – harnessing the blessings of what God has provided in nature with the commitment of human effort, skill and time. There are probably more but I'll content myself with those three for today.

Pruning

Life can become incredibly complicated. Being busy is normal for most people. Indeed, being TOO busy is extremely common – and is not without its difficulties and costs – the impact on family life, on health especially mental health – and it can affect the quality of work that we do. It is a hard lesson to learn but in work and even in our everyday living we sometimes have to cut back, not just simply add on. That goes for spiritual matters too – sometimes aspects of our lives become a little overgrown and as a result can be damaging to real growth. We can get carried away by trifles, led astray by things that are unwholesome, by spending inordinate amounts of time on things that while useful in moderation, can be damaging to other aspects of life if they are overdone. And, from the gardening model, yes sometimes we grow some really big weeds in our lives that need to be pulled out and dealt with. And sometimes we need to trim back, prune aspects of our lives that are becoming rather unkempt and wayward in order to encourage real healthy growth. As I understand it, pruning encourages the plant to draw nourishment from its roots, that reinforces the connection directly, rather than that connection and nourishment being unduly dissipated throughout unruly growth. We can take badly to aspects of our lives being pruned, cut back – we can feel the loss. The lesson through these tough times is to try to see the long term benefits, to continue to be rooted in Christ, in faith and to look

forward to the resultant growth both in the quality and extent. We should never underestimate how important is a good true relationship with God – for us, in our dealings with others, and in our bond with Christ and our effectiveness in his service.

Continuity

Christianity is all about God's grace. We are put right with God, not by our efforts, but freely and undeservedly, in Jesus Christ. And yet, that does not mean that we can or should play no part in our spiritual lives and leave it up to God. The old story about the clergyman leaning over the garden wall, admiring the beautiful garden beyond, saying to the gardener "How marvellous is the combination of God's blessing and man's efforts" – to get the reply "Well vicar, that's as may be, but you should have seen the state it was in when it was left to God alone!" Applying that to our spiritual lives, we would do well to engage with God in seeking to develop and sustain our faith on a regular basis – not pretending that our efforts alone will reap rewards, but by faith, seeking to align ourselves with God's plans and purposes, taking our lead from Jesus in his emphasis on being true both to his heavenly Father and towards his neighbour. Encouraging an ongoing commitment, relationship is vital to sustaining a sensible and practical faith in a world that will, without doubt, present its challenges. Prayer, worship and service to God and to others are intended to be regular and ongoing practices, not once in a blue moon experiences. Continuity of faith, giving opportunity for continuous spiritual nourishment are all part of God's design for the well being of his people, as individuals and collectively. And that latter point is worth a mention too – God wants us to draw spiritual nourishment directly from Jesus and his Spirit, but he has also created us to be a people of faith, not isolated individuals. There will be times when we need to give ourselves the time and opportunity to bud and to flower, but we are also in it together; we are designed both to support and be supported, to encourage and be encouraged, to be joined together, in Christ, in a common enterprise of living to the praise of his glory and serving the world together for his sake. It is incumbent on us to play attention not only to our own well being, but to be actively involved in looking out for one another, building up the whole body of Christ. You might be drawn to one particular beautiful bloom in a garden and admire it, but actually, the long term and wider ranging benefit will most likely be as we and others appreciate over time the beauty of the garden as a whole as it displays the wonder of creation and the fruits of human labour and care. Seeing Jesus at work in the life of a particular individual is wonderful, but more marvellous still is the results over time of the Spirit of Jesus at work in a whole fellowship of his people. We all need to be open to this kind of continuity and personal interaction so that we may facilitate God's grand design for us.

Growing together

Of course, there are times when it is good to sit in a garden and admire the view – whether it is your own or someone else's. There is a place for resting, relaxing, and switching off; taking time to take stock, reflect and re-energise. And we've had reminders that that can be a welcome counter to the strains and stresses we've all been under throughout the pandemic. But switching off and resting up is unlikely to work indefinitely. Inevitably, we need to return to the fray, to engage with the challenges as

well as the opportunities life, even in the post covid era in which we now live. The third of my lessons from gardening (and from John Chapter 15) is as Jesus says “My Father is the gardener”. We are his plants. Ultimately, we are not responsible for the state of the world, of the garden – God is! But, we are involved, and we can be involved in ways that are healthy and positive, or on occasions in ways that hinder and militate against healthy living. The picture in John 15 is of a healthy relationship between God and his people, that takes its source of life, from being rooted in Christ, of drawing strength and succour from an ongoing relationship of love in Christ. The gardener can prune and graft to foster growth but always the branches are connected to the tree and to the roots. The branches don’t have life apart from their connections with tree and roots. The notion that we can live healthy faithful lives apart from Jesus and his blessing is ludicrous. One of the greatest lessons we can learn for growing as Christians and as a Christian fellowship, is to see the importance of a strong ongoing relationship of love both to Jesus Christ and through him, to other Christians. God designs us to grow TOGETHER, with Jesus and with one another. That interrelated connection of love between God and his people is intrinsic to faithful Christian living, to growth in grace and to the effectiveness of Christian service towards God and the world. Without it, we are simply unable to function as God intends. With it, there is no limit to what God can do in us and through us.

We are not all green fingered – but there are some lessons we can learn from the garden about how means to work in our midst.

Let’s go into the future and rise to the challenges it will undoubtedly hold for us, TOGETHER – with each other, with Jesus – and look forward to the growth that he means to give us.

May the Lord bless you. Amen.