

Pruning made easy

Bearing fruit to God's glory

The sermon "Renounce all evil" in the series "I Turn to Christ" delves into themes of forgiveness, transformation, and caring for others through storytelling and biblical references. It emphasises the importance of renouncing evil, embracing spiritual growth, and bearing fruit in God's vine. Through the tale of Jacob and Esau, the pastor illustrates the journey of forgiveness, redemption, and identity in God. Believers are urged to abide in Jesus, accept spiritual renewal, and nurture each other as part of God's vine for a fruitful life.

renounce

all that is evil.



Vineyard in the Macedon Ranges Shire

Storytime

I enjoy a good story!

Today's story is on the front cover of the pew bulletin, so I ask you to bear with me as we settle down to read this together. Now, if I were being true to my teaching background, I would have an excellent picture book in which I would ask you all to come up and sit in the sanctuary as I tell you the superb yet colourful story of how the vine of God that abides in us and us in God was first called "Israel".

I will add a few extra sentences not in your text, so forgive me if I go off-script. In the spirit of today's gospel, there was indeed the need to prune.

It was late one night when a couple of things happened to young Jacob. Although he had already purchased the birthright from his elder twin, Esau, the blessing of the eldest was not necessarily part of the deal. Because Rebecca and Isaac had waited over twenty years to have the children, they were delighted to know they were having twins. When it was the fullness of time, Esau, which means 'red', was born, looking like a beetroot and covered in hair. Holding onto his heel was another boy. As he was smooth and hairless, they named him "Jacob", which means "Heel".

As the boys grew, Esau loved the outdoors. He was a good hunter and loved to fight. His brother Jacob was a more delicate puppy and preferred to stay home and tidy the tents, cook meals, and darn socks. They were as different as being hairy and smooth!

One day, Esau arrived home with the hunt, but being ravenous from the day out, he couldn't be bothered waiting to skin and prepare the deer he caught. Jacob had already made supper for Ma and Pa bar Abraham, so he demanded food from his brother. Jacob said he would, but only if he sold his birthright in exchange. Now, what that means is that Jacob would, from the point of view of the last will of Isaac, inherit the goods and chattels. As for the blessing of being head of the clan, that would remain with Esau.

Esau, his tummy rumbling due to the lack of food, agreed. As his brother had already earned two Michelin stars for his cooking prowess, this seemed like a good deal.

As father Isaac, now old, feeble, and blind, lay ready to die, Esau hunted deer to provide for his father a bowl of savoury meat. Knowing that Jacob was prophesied to have the blessing, Rebecca, their mum, set out to help Jacob deceive his father. Jacob, a smooth man, disguised himself to pass as his brother. Isaac, still not sure, did indeed bless Jacob. Needless to say, Esau, who is "a hairy man," was not happy. He vowed to kill Jacob, so Jacob became a fugitive like many of the Hebrew scripture heroes.

In what is modern Palestine, laying down to sleep, no doubt like a cat with one eye open, Jacob dreams of the angels of God ascending and descending. He called this place "Beth-el", the house of God.

At the age of 77, Jacob arrived at the farm of a man called Laban. At the well, near the tents, Jacob saw Rachel and desired to be married at first sight. In those days, you didn't have to get a red rose and a sob story with soppy music to become engaged. Jacob immediately put a ring through her nose and led her to Laban to ask for her hand in marriage. Despite the age difference, Laban agreed, but only if Jacob would tend his sheep for at least the next seven years. Once that time was up, because Leah, Rachel's elder sister, was not yet married, it was not appropriate for Jacob to have the love of his life. So he had to marry Leah with the promise that after another seven years, he could marry Rachel.

After some time and a storyline of marriages and betrayals worthy of any US daytime soap, Jacob tried to return to Canaan. There was the matter of a teraphim, a little 'household' god. They set off after leaving with Leah, Rachel, and the twelve children who followed both of them and the handmaids called Bilhah and Zilpah. These twelve children were to later lend their names and estates to what is known as the twelve tribes of Israel.

Having been told that Esau had a welcoming party of at least 400 warriors, Jacob spent the night in prayer. He then encountered an angel of God whom he wrestled all night. Jacob prevailed, but the angel, who did not wish to be named, threw Jacob's hip out. Because he had 'striven' with God all night at Penuel (face of God), Jacob was renamed "Isra-el," one who strives with God and lives.

Jacob (Isra-el) paid off his brother with gifts of coats and camels.

The people of God were to be known by this name. The image used for Isra-el is a vine.

So, a long story that doesn't seem to have any bearing on the message of abiding in God, being part of the vine that is Jesus, and being aware that sometimes a good makeover in our spiritual garden is just as important as knowing that God still does this bizarre thing. Those we may think of as unworthy of being part of the vine are, in fact, the ones who are often chosen to bear much fruit.

Forgiveness and newness in life are at the heart of the story of the tribes of Israel. This is why the imagery of the vine takes on a new and different meaning. Many of the scholars I read in my reflection point out that this week's message is revolutionary yet orthodox in how God works through his body.

Last week, I read from Uncle Ron Williams's prose reworking *The Good Shepherd* in terms of being a father-emu. Jesus referred to himself as a 'mother-hen'. In the Psalms, David talks about the connectedness and anointing from God as being the life within the vine. From this one vine comes many branches. From those branches comes much fruit.

I inherited a garden, which I always wanted to explore and do in my old age. One of my great uncles and aunts, Reg and Olive, had a very deep front yard. Where everyone else would have manicured lawns and flowers, they had vegetables. They also planted a large garden in my grandmother's house. I'm trying to recall a lot from what I learned from them. Growing up, our next-door neighbour also had gardens everywhere.

Oddly, one was in a former silage pond on the next-door neighbour's farm. If you do not know what that is, the wastewater from washing out the dairy went there at the end of the milking. I am familiar with it from having ended up in it as a toddler! I don't remember it, but my mother indeed never forgot.

Throughout the Bible, from the ministry of Jesus, Paul, and the apostles to the Psalms, Solomon's wisdom, and his raunchy *Song of Songs*, every day is celebrated as an integral part of God's creation. Each day is new, and every season requires us to be attentive to the need to nurture and care for all who are part of the vine, whether growing from or grafted in. The imagery is vital.

Today is not a day as some of my colleagues may take the opportunity to suggest removing the dead wood or something that they do not want in the community. No, it is a time of recognising what is not life-giving or affirming, pruning and encouraging new growth. We need to decide what goes. Jacob was not a lovely young man. Laban was a crafty old sod! Esau was a person of anger. His uncle Ismael, well, there is another story. David was an adulterer and philander. Jonah was just thick. And Moses was wanted for murder.

Peter denied Jesus three times, and Paul persecuted the early Church. And yet, if we were to say they should all have been pruned, would we be here now?

Last week, the message was that the sheep had scattered. The voice of love goes out to the whole world to call them back in. Thanks to the resurrection, we all face the possibility and reality that we can be reborn and begin again. God's love has no limits, and neither should ours.

Abide in me as I abide in you. Connected back to the exemplar, which is the reality of being made one in Christ and he with us, our duty and care is to the poor, the sick, the marginalised, those in prison, and those whose need for forgiveness is greatest. The required pruning is not so much those who are lost

or unsightly; it is those who, through repentance, forgiveness and turning to Christ, are called to bear much fruit to his glory.

The source of being a member of the House of Israel was to abide in this vine.

When Jesus says, "I am the vine," he is pointing out that we are to be a part of him, the one who strives or abides in God, by our acceptance of him as Saviour and Redeemer through baptism.

Jesus the Vine is the perfection of Israel—the people who abide in God and God in them. As the Body of Christ, the pruning and nurturing are up to all of us, for God's spirit is with us.



Icebreaker

What funniest or most embarrassing thing happened to you during a family gathering or holiday celebration?

1. How does the story of Jacob and Esau relate to the concept of forgiveness and spiritual transformation?

Context: The sermon discusses the story of Jacob and Esau and the eventual renaming of Jacob as Israel, forming the twelve tribes of Israel.

Application Question: Can you think of a time when you experienced forgiveness or spiritual transformation in your own life?

2. Why is it important for believers to be part of the vine of God and to care for others who are part of it as well?

Context: The sermon emphasises the value of nurturing and caring for all who are part of the vine, whether growing or grafted in and recognising what is not life-giving or affirming.

Application Question: How can you care for and support others in your faith community?

3. How can we practice 'pruning' in our spiritual lives to encourage new growth?
Context: The sermon discusses their experience with gardening and how each day and season requires attention and care for growth.

Application Question: What aspects of your spiritual life may need pruning, and how can you work on them?

4. How does baptism connect believers to Jesus and make them a part of the vine?
Context: The sermon highlights the importance of accepting Jesus as Saviour and Redeemer through baptism, becoming part of the vine.

Application Question: If you have been baptised, how has that experience strengthened your connection to Jesus and the faith community?

5. Why is it essential for all believers to take responsibility for pruning and nurturing the Body of Christ?
Context: The sermon states that as the Body of Christ, the responsibility of pruning and nurturing lies with all believers, as God's spirit is with them.

Application Question: What roles or responsibilities can you take on within your faith community to help nurture and encourage growth?

PRAYER POINTS

- *Pray for each other's prayer requests and lift them to God's guidance and provision.*
- *Ask God to help us recognise and renounce evil in our lives, seeking forgiveness and a newness of life.*
- *Pray for a spirit of care and nurturing within our small group so that we may encourage and support one another in our spiritual growth.*
- *Ask God to help us bear fruit for His glory, individually and as a collective body of believers.*

Risen Christ,
 your wounds declare your love for the world
 and the wonder of your risen life:
 give us compassion and courage
 to risk ourselves for those we serve,
 to the glory of God the Father. Amen.