

**St. Margaret's Uniting Church**  
**Mooroolbark**  
**Sunday, 8<sup>th</sup> October, 2017**

Reflection by Mr Bruce Hill

*From Greensborough Uniting – Church of Christ congregation*

Reading from New Testament –

From a letter by the apostle Paul to the Christians at Philippi,  
Chapter 3, verses 4b to 14 – Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

“If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more -  
circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the  
tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee;  
as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the  
law, blameless.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because  
of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the  
surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have  
suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that  
I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my  
own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ,  
the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and  
the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by  
becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection  
from the dead.”

This morning we read of Jesus' confrontation with the Chief Priests  
and Elders.

They come challenging Jesus' authority to do all the things that He  
does such as preaching, teaching, performing many different miracles,  
and kicking out their business partners from the temple.

They could not deny that he had the power to do these things, they  
are challenging his right to do them. They are seeking to show that  
Jesus is either a usurper of Judaism or that he is a blasphemer claiming  
authority directly from God. Their scheme did not work, and instead

resulted in their own condemnation, which they clearly understood after Jesus told them the parable of the wicked tenants.

"Listen to another parable, says Jesus. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country.

When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'

But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time."

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'?"

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet."

When the landowner planted a vineyard he did all that was necessary to ensure that the land bore fruit and yielded a harvest. Satisfied with his preparations, the landowner rented the vineyard to tenant farmers. All that they needed for an abundant harvest was to prepare the land and plant the vines.

The landowner in this parable is a reference to God, the vineyard to Israel, the tenants to the Jewish religious leaders. The landowners'

slaves, or servants, refer to the prophets. The son refers to Jesus Christ, and the other tenants to the Gentiles.

The Jewish religious leaders were unfaithful to God and refused to listen to the prophets who remained faithful and proclaimed the Word of God to Israel. The vineyard belonged to God who, as the owner, demanded part of the yield. They withheld from God what was rightfully His and thereby denied themselves God's blessings. Without the blessings of God the vineyard could only yield sour grapes.

Unfortunately we seem to repeat the same mistake today. We fail to see God as the owner of everything we have and refuse to give God what is justly demanded.

Withholding from God what is rightfully God's is to deny ourselves God's blessings. God blesses obedience and empowers the obedient to bear the fruit of love, holiness, justice and righteousness in their lives. God cannot bless disobedience and the disobedient end up bearing the fruit of hate, injustice, oppression and idolatry.

The landowner's love and provisions made no impact on the tenant farmers. They rejected his love and rather sought to take over his vineyard. We are still rejecting God's love today and instead we want to put ourselves in the place of God so that there is no longer any need to obey God. Our disobedience has resulted in hate, envy and greed.

Envy and greed leads to wickedness and rebellion. An envious and greedy person will destroy anything and anyone that dares stand in their way even if it leads to death.

Wickedness and rebellion will eventually lead to murder. When the landowner sent his servants to collect his rightful share of the fruit, the farmers mistreated some, beat up others and even killed some of them.

However God was unwilling to give up on the tenant farmers, the Pharisees, or anyone else for that matter.

Jesus perseveres with them by sending his own son, Jesus, to them, and to us. Jesus is unwilling to give up on you or me. He just keeps on coming. Jesus perseveres with us. That is the good news, hope, and joy in today's parable. This is not so much a parable of condemnation as it is a parable of Jesus' unwillingness to give up.

His unwillingness to give up on us often confronts us with truth about our lives that is almost always difficult to hear and accept. We might hear his words, but not realize that he is talking about us.

This parable and the confrontation it provokes are like a mirror held before us so that we might see and recognize in ourselves what Jesus sees and recognizes in us. This is not to condemn us, but to redeem us, to call us back to life, and to lead us home.

Jesus doesn't exclude us or anyone else from the kingdom of God. He doesn't have to. We do it to ourselves and we're pretty good at that. That's what the Pharisees had done. They excluded themselves.

"The kingdom of God will be taken away from you," Jesus says to them. This is not so much a punishment for failing to produce kingdom fruits. It is, rather, the recognition of what already is. They were given the vineyard and failed to produce and share the fruits of the kingdom. Jesus is just naming the reality, the truth.

In the same way, the kingdom of God will be given to those who are already producing kingdom fruits. This is not a reward but a recognition of what already is. Where the fruit is, there also is the kingdom.

If you want to know what the fruits of the kingdom look like then look at the life of God revealed in Jesus Christ. What do you see? You see love, intimacy, mercy and forgiveness, justice, generosity, compassion, wisdom, truth, healing, reconciliation, self-surrender, joy, thanksgiving, peace, obedience, and humility. These things are not just abstract ideas, but as lived realities in the vineyards of our lives.

We've all been given vineyards. They are the people, relationships, circumstances and events of our lives that God has entrusted to our care. That means our spouse and marriage, children and family, our work, our church, our daily decisions and choices, our hopes, dreams, and concerns are the vineyards in which we are to reveal the presence and life of God, to produce the fruits of the kingdom. The vineyards, our work in those vineyards, and the fruit produced should come together to show us to be sharers in God's kingdom.

Just as God has persevered with us, we must in turn persevere in our faith, just as Paul persevered in his faith.

"Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus".

This grace-bathed persistence is designed not just to help us receive what God has in store for us but to help us to share the gospel with others to see that the next generation is also the beneficiary of God's grace.

This morning, I want to emphasize the importance of ensuring that the next generation is also the beneficiary of God's grace.

At a recent "Builders seminar" that I attended, Mark Sayers, author of the book "Disappearing church" stated that in the West, we are now living in a post-Christian culture, and many people think that the decline of the Christian church is a straight line graph of decline.

However he gave evidence from history that the rise and decline of Christian faith within society follows a cyclical pattern of rise and fall and that in this rise and fall are five generations:

- The first is the Preparer generation where faithful Christians sow the seeds, such as happened in the 1860's in Melbourne.
- The second generation is the Pioneer generation that allows the new church to start, tending new springs of growth, taking risks to reshape and systematize what they have learned.
- The third generation is the Traditionalist generation, that tries to stick to this, is more resourced, with churches full and the movement growing.
- The fourth generation is the Manager generation, continuing the way things have been done in the past but a time when decay sets in.
- The fifth generation is the Deconstruction generation that questions and deconstructs what has been done before.

Things seem bad and the future of the church appears hopeless. This is where we are today with the decay of the Christian church as we know it

starting in the last 30 years. We are now approaching the bottom of the curve, a time of wilderness for the church.

What we must now be doing is nurturing the younger generation of believers, few though they may be. This will be the remnant of the church that will become the Preparer generation that will spark a new and exciting era for the Christian church, a church that will be completely different from the way we understand church today.

It is therefore of the greatest importance that we nurture the faith of the young people in our churches, such as those who shared their stories at Synod.

We do this by sharing our faith stories with our children, our grandchildren, our great grandchildren, and with those whom we come into contact with in our daily lives.

More now than ever, we need to be sharing our Christian faith with others, persevering in our faith, despite living in a non-Christian culture.

The other way in which we persevere in our faith is by allowing Jesus to prune our branches, allowing us to be changed by Christ, like Basil the branch was in our Early Word this morning, to produce good grapes.

Each of us has branches within our vine that need to be pruned in order that our lives yield more fully the fruits of the spirit: love, joy peace patience, goodness, kindness and self-control. There is nothing more powerful than being a witness of Christ to others by the way that you live.

When our determination is to persevere and to keep on keeping on, but we falter in the effort, God is there to carry us on. If our faith is not always at its best, God still remains faithful because God loves you and me so much.

God has persevered with us and sent his son Jesus Christ to die for you and for me. As Christians, we need to persevere in our faith by inviting the gardener to prune our lives, inviting and allowing Jesus to continue to change us from within, so that we produce more and more of the fruits of the spirit in our lives.