

Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> April, 2018  
5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter- Year B

Acts 8:26-40  
Psalm 22:26-32  
1John 4:7-21  
John 15:1-8

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

Henri Nouwen was a Dutch Catholic Priest who lived in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. His life initially was based around lecturing and teaching and writing, and he was highly successful in all of these ways, having an esteemed academic career. However, later in his life he responded to a call to leave that life and join and minister to a community of mentally and physically handicapped people at the Daybreak community, in Canada.

He was fond of telling the following story...

“There was once a sculptor who worked with hammer and chisel on a large block of marble. A child who was watching him saw nothing more than pieces of stone falling away left and right. He had no idea what was happening. But when the boy returned to the studio a few weeks later, he saw to his surprise, a huge powerful lion sitting in the place where the marble block once stood. In awe and excitement the boy ran to the sculptor and exclaimed, ‘Sir, tell me... How did you know there was a lion inside that stone?’”

God the Sculptor looks at us... and knows there is a life of exquisite beauty within... just waiting to emerge. The Spirit chips away all that is unnecessary... unhelpful...all that which masks and hides the true image of who we are created to be. Thus over time, as a consequence of God’s work, our true self is revealed...

And this is new life... resurrection life... where like the risen Christ at Easter, we are (at last) seen in all our created glory... our God-given beauty... our true selves. This is what happens when we open ourselves to resurrection.

And so hopefully with our imagination refreshed by a different metaphor, let's turn our attention to a scriptural image very familiar to our ears... In John 15, Jesus says, "I am the true vine and God is the gardener." (1)

God is the Gardener, and we as His creation are branches of the true vine of Christ. The Spirit of God prunes us in order that our essence, our true life, may flower, flourish and fruit. Pruning is an intentionally harsh metaphor - the cutting away of that which is barren; the burning of the dead wood; the eradication of anything which refuses to bear fruit - and so it indeed feels in our life. The Spirit prunes us in the experience of failure, shattered dreams, dead-ends and suffering of all kinds.

But as with the metaphor of the sculptor, the gardener is not cruel, but rather works that the true nature of the vine might flourish. In this Easter season we are given the vision of branches that were once barren and dying, being restored to abundant flourish and fruit. This is new life... resurrection life.

Today's metaphor of the experience of resurrection is passive - we are the stone upon which the sculptor works, we are the branches that the gardener prunes. Because it is a passive metaphor, that has us seemingly doing very little (and certainly not in charge), it is less attractive to contemporary ears, with the dominant thought these days being about taking charge - we making something of ourselves... but it is critical that we, and indeed the church, rediscover this alternative reality. New life comes as a consequence of God's action on our lives! We cannot resurrect ourselves. Only the work of the Spirit can bring forth resurrection in us.

It is critical that we understand this - the work of resurrection (of transformation) is God's and God's alone... But even in this passive place where we are stone, or we are the branches... being acted upon, we are also active. We are active in the sense that we must consent to the Spirit's work... we open ourselves to the Spirit's work... we pay attention to and cooperate with the Spirit's work... we relax our bodies, hearts and minds and go with the Spirit's wave... we choose stillness and float in the Spirit's flow.

So, the Spirit does the work - but we must discipline ourselves to become more aware of it, and intentionally consent to the process. In regard to this, Henri Nouwen says that... "Spiritual disciplines are the skills and (practices) by which we begin to see the image of God in our heart. Spiritual formation is the careful attentiveness to the work of God, our master sculptor, as we submit to the gradual chipping away of all that is not of God, until the inner lion is revealed."

Thus it is that new life, resurrection life, emerges in us... as we consent to the work of the Spirit, shaping and pruning our lives. And there is no more precious gift than to be freed to live the life of who we truly are... to live the beauty and glory that is our created birth-right. How wonderful this is for us!

But just in case we misunderstood the nature of this resurrected life, today's gospel reminds us, indeed hammers it home repetitively so there can be no confusion... that essential to new life is the business of bearing fruit. (Quoting from John...) "...you are to bear fruit in plenty (in abundance) and so be my disciples." (8) All of the pruning has just one purpose - that we can bear fruit. Simply put, this new life is not just for our own peace and joy, but is given to us to share with others!

There is nothing in the resurrection experience, in new life... that is about self-indulgence. Just as we relinquish control in this resurrection process of new birth, so too we are called to give away that which we hold most closely - in a self-emptying like that of our Saviour.

Jesus gave all for those whom he loved; he quite literally laid down his life for his friends. And our call as Christians is nothing less than this - to open our hearts and our hands to those in need; to follow empty-handed where Christ would call us to be and to minister in his name.

And we are reminded today that wherever and whenever we become self-focused, then the Spirit will prune us... and prune us back hard!

God knows that within us, sometimes buried deeply, and held preciously to ourselves, there is a lion... which the sculptor longs to bring forth. The Spirit invites us to open ourselves up to this possibility - so that our lives might shine with the light of the resurrection, and we might bring that light to all whom we meet. "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."

The Lord be with you...