

## Rev'd Emily's Sermon – Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> January 2024

### Second Sunday of Epiphany

#### Readings:

**Revelation 5: 1-10**

**John 1: 43-51**

When I was younger, on a Saturday morning, my mother and I used to go shopping in our village just up the road from my house. One of the shops I remember most vividly, was the visit to the greengrocers to buy our fruit and vegetables.

I used to marvel at the neatly stacked colourful fruit of all different shapes and sizes and always remember fondly the fragrance of earthiness even to this day. Nowadays, we don't see much of these shops around, although I was surprised to see that this greengrocer was still open when I went home last year in November! But in our 21st century culture, people do not use them so much because the produce does not seem to keep for as long as supermarket mass-produced items, which are sprayed with goodness-knows how many preservatives and chemicals to keep them fresh for longer.

The bible has a bit to say about fruit. For it was supposedly from the first apple that evil and death entered the world. Talk about a 'bad apple' (pun intended!)

In the New Testament, it is Jesus and St Paul who have a lot to say about fruit and fruitfulness. And This morning's reading happens to feature a most delicious fruit, the fig. However, like the shelves laden with abundance from my childhood, we will also be hearing about the abundance and fruitfulness of discipleship. What does it mean to be fruitful as a disciple and follower of Jesus?

Today the gospel begins with the calling of Nathanael who was sitting under a fig tree when Jesus approaches him. Philip has tried to coax Nathanael to 'come and see' Jesus, but he will not come and find him. However, like most people who are called, he doesn't get away that easily! For Jesus comes and finds him instead! I find it interesting that of all the trees he could be sitting under, it is this one. In the Old Testament, is the promise of the uniting of nations under this tree, a picture of prosperity and peace. However, in the New Testament, it is only a little later on in the gospels that Jesus, on his way to Jerusalem to his death will curse a tree like this, but not because it is laden with fruit, but because it is bare, it has no fruit to give to him. However, I like to think that the tree Nathanael was sitting under was fruitful.

How else can it be that Nathanael can recognise Jesus as 'the son of God, the king of Israel' even after first being reluctant and rather incredulous that 'anything good could come out of Nazareth.'

So, right from the beginning, Nathanael seems to be a disciple whose witness 'bears good fruit' and as Jesus emphasizes, 'by their fruit you shall know them...'

Going back to the visit to the greengrocers, my mum used to gently pick up the fruit, look at it and sometimes sniff it and with melons, she used to give them a little squeeze. At first, I used to wonder what on earth she could be doing, but I later learnt that she did this to tell if the fruit was ripe. I now catch myself doing similar!

But what is the 'good fruit' that discipleship can bring forth? We can't go around sniffing or squeezing people, can we?! Jesus says we shall know them, but how?

Well, according to St Paul, 'the fruit of the spirit is: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.' Quite a list there and I'm sure I'm not even close to being all of those, even Jesus' disciples didn't, but perhaps there are degrees of ripeness. Perhaps like the nectarines that my mother used to place on the windowsill for the sun to ripen a bit more. In our case, perhaps spiritual growth resembles ripening fruit. We begin our journey hard and discoloured and eventually start to soften, however it isn't the light from the physical sun that we require, but the light of God's presence shining on us.

What is the opposite of the fruit of the spirit. We aren't really told. But I am reminded of bananas. I remember reading somewhere once, that if you do not put bananas separately to your other fruit, the fruit that they are next to will ripen and go bad faster. They will also smell of bananas. Similarly, fruit can turn bad, or a tree will not bear any fruit. It will be empty. With bad or rotten fruit, not only does it start to smell unpleasant, but the mould can spread rather quickly in the right environment. Likewise, the wrong conduct can rub off on others and can be passed on. Behavioural studies have shown that toxic environments can be created by one individual, passing on negativity to one person who then transmits it to another and then another. Some studies can even plot the results on a diagram to show who the negativity affected and from whom it came from. I am reminded of the beginning of the book 'the Twits.' As people who bear good fruit can be seen and known for their good actions, so those who bear bad fruit are destructive and empty.

We can see this played out recently on our television screens and the media and I tread carefully here, in the televised drama which narrated the continually unfolding tragedy of the Post Office and its faulty computerised administration system. As you will recall, innocent Sub postmasters were relentlessly pursued through the courts for crimes they did not commit, leading to their imprisonment, marriage breakdown and tragically in one case at least, suicide. We can also see that the finger of blame has been pointed at the CEO of the Post Office at the time. Whilst I cannot and will not judge this woman for what she did and did not do and what she did and did not know, it is clear that, as Christians, we must be mindful at all times of the fruit we are bearing and who we are representing. The fruit that this scandal has produced is indeed gone bad, where once it might have been thought to have been good and the consequences of this have been fatal.

So, how can we tend to ourselves and cultivate goodness and fruitfulness in all we do? How can we allow ourselves to be softened under the sunlight of God?

We might start with prayer. We could set some time aside every day to sit and be still and quiet and talk to God. We could tell him about our day. What we have done, where we could do better, where we really need to apologise to someone we have hurt. God is always with us and He is always willing to listen. We might also come to church regularly, even when, especially when we don't feel like it and would rather be doing something more 'exciting.' Here we can be honest and open to God and be nourished by him in the bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ. As Lent is fast approaching, we might consider the Lenten disciplines we could undertake this year. We might consider the discipline of giving something up for Lent or coming to confession. Even if we have never been before, we can undertake the Sacrament of Reconciliation with an open heart and without shame knowing that it will transform us in ways we cannot imagine.

We do not really need to 'do' anything to please God. At the heart of this is not that we become someone different. But that we become more fully who we are and who God knows us to be deep down inside. However, it is only when we know that we are loved absolutely, that we can love others. It is through us and out of us, that God's love for others flows.

God is our master gardener who tends and cares for us wanting nothing better for us than that we be all that we can be, that we thrive and bloom and that we bear good fruit. Fruit that will last.