

Read Archbishop Justin's sermon, which he preached at Belfast Central Mission as part of the Four Corners Festival:

Come Holy Spirit and fill our hearts with the fire of your love.

There is nothing more painful than separation. Whether we are separated from each other, as we all experienced during the pandemic, from our planet's well-being or, most of all, from our God. Separation is the rupture of something totally essential to our being, to who we are.

Physically, culturally, psychology, and spiritually, we live in a time of separation, of isolation and individualism. So many of these issues the pandemic has thrown up have tempted us to think about my rights, my choices and my wants. But, the biggest lesson of the pandemic has been to see the absurdity of the idea that our actions don't deeply affect others as a fallacy.

As well as the pandemic, the world faces the reality of climate change. There is no individual victory when it comes to climate change or the pandemic. With both, we are bound to one another to face the same fate – albeit some people sooner than others.

Our connection to one another has never been clearer, but many of us has never felt more alone. We can't see the wood of community for the trees of our own wants, needs and desires. We've lost something of our sense of our communal life.

In our reading, in John chapter 15, Jesus turns our faces away from the false ideas of self-sufficiency, of atomisation and isolation. He is the vine, and His Father is the vine-grower. To be the branches of the vine is to not just live with Jesus, or know about Jesus, or to have the right doctrines - but to live in Jesus. We are offered an intimacy with him, to be sustained and nourished. In Jesus, God walks with us, but now He promises us an even closer relationship – one where he will live in us and through us, where we will all be drawn into one body, one vineyard.

Recently I have been talking to people for a new Radio series that will come out on Radio 4. For once, I've been asking the questions, and one of my guests was a woman called Elif Shafak, a Turkish-British novelist who writes in English. She speaks and writes movingly and brilliantly about our need for one another. When I was preparing for the interview I read her most recent book. One of the narrators in the book is a fig tree – very recognisable for those of us who read our bibles.

In the book, Elif talks about the practice of burying fig trees in particularly cruel winters, to preserve them in the cold and harsh weather. This is done by pruning the branches, and then the tree is gently pushed into a trench in the ground. Once the tree is lying there, you cover it to keep it warm, and come the following spring, you unbury the tree. You do it with great care, you treat the tree as precious and valuable. You prune and bury it because you love it and want it to grow and flourish. Here is the nature of the promise of new life in the pruning Jesus talks about in verse 2 – here it is, another step, another season, along the journey to being even more fruitful.

And I saw through her book how plants show us the connections we don't notice; the history that goes beyond our individual memories; the interconnection and ecosystems that each one of us is a part of - physical, spiritual, social - and essential to; the gentle change of time and season, of decay followed by the promise of renewal. You know all about this in Northern Ireland. Everyone seems to be connected to almost everyone.

Their presence bears witness to that which is unseen but real. The existence of vines - of any plant - is testimony to being part of the whole. Bearing the fruit of the vine is totally dependent on our relationship with the vine.

Bearing the fruit of the vine is totally dependent on relationship, connection, and mutuality. We can't grow fruit on our own. In the Matthew Jesus says "by their fruit, you will know them".

By our fruit we can be known as people of relationship, of loving neighbour, because of intimacy with God in Christ. We can be known as people of peace, able to break down the walls that divide us - that have divided people in Northern Ireland. Because of intimacy with God in Christ.

We find two commandments before this text - which are repeated after it - "wash feet" and "love one another" and love one another, both in 13.

Those are the commandments Jesus tells us to accept. That is the context that builds the foundation for Jesus' final public prayer and ends in the climax of John 17:21: the world will know the truth, that Jesus has come from the Father, when Christians are one, are united. United does not mean identical in the Bible. God created a universe of almost infinite variety. United means ensuring mutual flourishing and abundant life. It means loving one another.

That is the wonderful, exciting truth of Jesus' personal, relational, life giving and fruit bearing. It promises an ever closer relationship. It promises sustenance rather than distance, the sharing of a new common life, in which no one is excluded or left out.

The branch cannot say to the vine "I don't need you!"

We flourish when we turn away from our desire for personal autonomy, the self-deterministic world today we see in genetics, psychology and upbringing, the passion to be self-justified and self-saving. Jesus' call contradicts the sense of sovereignty that ever bigger developments in science and technology have afforded us, but which have been contradicted by our fragility, our helplessness against the pandemic, against climate change, against our own internal longing for power

What we do and how we behave in this divided world matters deeply, because it shows or fails to show the love of God. It leads to fruit, or no fruit.

Today across much of the world there will be a grateful remembering of the 70 years of service that the Queen has given. Service she gives first to God, then to the country and far more widely. It reaches far beyond those places where sheâs head of state. It is seen and summed up in words she has used when asked about her wants and desires. She says âitâs not about meâ. In that faithfulness to duty based in faithfulness to God, we see her bearing the fruit of a life of service and of love.

And by that fruit, we are known and the love of God is shown. And when we allow Jesus truly to live in us, we begin to shape the world towards the Kingdom of Heaven, not by force, but through the love of God . We see the hope of a place of life, of mutuality and vitality and diversity, of growth and connection and blessing. There, we will find a place where we reclaim and celebrate our belonging to one another in the body of Christ and the abundant love of God who holds us together and tends to us in His vineyard.

Amen.

6 min read

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