

“Abide in my love”, a sermon based on John 15:1-8 preached by Rev Dr John Franklin at Knox Church, Dunedin, New Zealand on Sunday 29 April 2018.

Last Monday, we were in Timaru, and with grandchildren, we went to the movie, *Early Man*.

Well, it turned out to be a movie about football, and the contest between the Stone Age guys and the Bronze Age guys. The bronzes wanted to take over the Stoney’s lush valley and mine it. So if Bronze won, they got the valley, and if the Stones won, they keep the valley. Trouble was, Bronze had a great team, and Stone Agers had no idea about football. But with the help of a young woman who defects from Bronze, they start training.

And along the way, they discover cave drawings that show that their ancestors played football. Wow! They are inspired, and make great progress in their training.

But, and there is always a but isn’t there, because as we well know, not everything always goes right. Things have a way of turning to custard. Dug, spelt D-U-G, the main Stone Age character, discovers more cave drawings, and to his dismay sees images of the ancestors always losing. They were failures. And Dug is shocked and overcome with anxiety. Anxiety graduates to the fear that they will lose. And fear morphs to hopelessness. He starts to believe “We are losers. It’s in our gene pool. We can’t win.”

Despair is the result. But what wins him back is the team – their passion and their energy, their believing. His anxiety is pruned off. And cleansed of all the negativity, his beliefs change. They can do it! And attitude changes behaviour.

So, for suspense, they score first, but then lose, till there is a final come back, and victory. Along with all the fun, this movie is a good picture of what anxiety and fear can do. It is paralysing, disabling.

And Jordan Peterson, Professor of Psychology in Toronto, talks about the epidemic of anxiety that is in our culture, saying we have every reason to anxious all the time. We are vulnerable. We get hurt. A lot of things do not go according to plan. We are going to die, along with a lot of wildlife.

I heard on Friday’s radio that while a quarter of the world’s sea birds nest in New Zealand, 90% of them are endangered. And some terrible people are running whole countries, and people are dying. And why are our churches declining? What about global warming, not to mention this weekend’s rain? There is an awful lot to get anxious about.

So Peterson says, when what we are anxious about, afraid of, is named, conceptualised, is broken down into units that we can address, what happens is that we get braver. Sometimes we don't realise how brave we are. But when we rise to the challenge, and address issues a piece at a time, we generate courage, and hope.

Jesus says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in me, believe in me – rather than in your troubles."

That's about getting braver – growing and thriving in the face of challenge and threat, rather than being overcome by it.

And in today's gospel, we have the image of pruning. Jesus says the Father is the gardener, he is the vine, and we all are the branches.

And what's a vine's purpose in life? To grow grapes. And to grow an abundance of grapes, yearly pruning is necessary.

From what I remember before I go to prune my daughter and son in law's massive old vine in Timaru, is cut back to two buds on the shoot from the main stem.

Why? To ensure a good crop next year. Rampant growth produces no fruit.

God is into pruning, Jesus is saying. And something that often needs pruning is anxiety - cut clean off.

Peterson says we have two great anxieties: death, and lack of social acceptance.

Death. Things die. We die. We break our mother's gorgeous vase. The financial plan goes belly up. The dog gets run over. The family member is diagnosed with terminal disease and inconceivable as it is in the everyday, we really are going to die. And there is sadness and grief. Stuff happens. Dying happens. Life is tough.

So shall we live anxiously waiting for the next misfortune to occur, the next assault on our wellbeing, the next threat of death?

What is Jesus saying? He is saying, "Abide in me, as I (already) abide in you."

Or as another translation has it, "Stay connected with me, as I am connected with you." "I have overcome the world," he says. He is resurrection energy living in us.

So I hear his invitation to give attention to him rather than dwelling on what could go wrong.

Connected with Christ, Julian of Norwich says, "All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." So death, where is your victory, where is your sting? Christ the risen one, is bigger than all our dyings.

And the other big anxiety – a lack of acceptance.

Peterson says, "People do not care whether or not they succeed; they care about whether or not they will fail."

And the fear of failing, of getting it wrong, is the fear that I will make a fool of myself, I'll be found wanting, and criticised.

And I can't do that. What if they don't like the dinner I have prepared? What if I get held up in traffic, and keep them waiting? What if I say the wrong thing and mess everything up? What if I got the dress code wrong and look silly? I have a responsibility to get the social cues right. I need to hold people's confidence.

Well, there is nothing wrong with a tinge of performance anxiety to keep us on our toes, but we serve no one, least of all ourselves, if we get paralytic like Stone Age Dug.

So, again, what is Jesus saying? I hear him saying, stay connected with me, dwell in me rather than in your anxieties and your endeavours will all be fruitful. The Lord will fulfil his purpose for me, says Psalm 138

And what's more, we hear Jesus saying, if you are dwelling in me, connected to me, ask what you will and it will be done for you. We had an experience.

Trish and I are celebrating a breakthrough with our daughter in Melbourne. She started a new job last week. She finished her law degree at Victoria with two summer schools in February, and went back to Melbourne expecting to get a job right away.

Nothing happened. Week one, week two, week three, week four went by creating a great arena for anxiety as the credit card debt went up and up.

We prayed. We prayed. We prayed. Prayed for a job that would get her into the law world. Give her today her daily bread – a job. And I heard my mother's oft-repeated saying, "Put it in the Lord's hands." We did. It was a call to not let our hearts be troubled, to not get anxious, but to trust in the provision of God, to let anxiety be pruned off.

And then, by Wednesday a week back, there were three excellent jobs, and one in a small law practice offering a wealth of experience. I said with the Psalmist, 'Blessed be God who hears our prayer.'

Jesus says, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love." What a glorious invitation. A serious choice. Abide, dwell in love, dwell in Christ rather than in anxiety and fear.

So I think a question that arises out of today's gospel is, "Where do you want to live?" We can live in anxiety and fear, or we can live in love? There is always choice – as I was saying to the lovely young couple whose wedding I conducted here yesterday. Love is always a choice. Which makes me think of the classic line in Deuteronomy, "Today I am giving you a choice. You can choose life and success, or death and disaster." And you see Moses jumping up and down saying, "Choose life." Yes, we have choice. Somehow the brain has negativity as a default setting. But with spiritual discipline, we can choose life rather than anxiety.

Choose life. I hear Jesus... "Abide, dwell in my love." We can choose to dwell, abide in his love. There all shall be well.

Abide, consciously acknowledge his presence in the everyday. Solidify it in prayer and meditation practice. Abide, dwell, remain connected with...

Some stuff may need pruning so we fit into the abiding space, like Dug needed to get rid of anxiety to make room for the chance to win. And pruning is all good, which is what the horticulturists and the gospel tell us.

So we leave off with this profound, life-giving, fruit-generating invitation of Jesus, "Abide in my love," for there anxiety and fear are pruned, and life and fruitfulness will flow.

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