

Called to Bear Fruit!

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Date: 22 September 2024

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[0 : 0 0] The story of the Bible starts with two trees and ends with one. In the beginning, there's the tree of life, which represents obedience and righteousness.

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which represents independence from God, rebellion and death. And then by the end of the Bible, in Revelation, there's the tree of life.

That's what remains, what's mortal, has been swallowed up by life. And to my surprise, maybe to your surprise, in the book of Acts, the word cross, such as Jesus dying on the cross for our sins, the word cross doesn't appear, not even once.

But the apostles boldly proclaim that Jesus was killed by being hung on a tree. And afterwards, then he was taken down from the tree and laid in a tomb.

And similarly, the apostle Paul points out that Jesus became a curse for us by being hung on a tree. And Peter says that Jesus bore our sins in his body on a tree. And so clearly there's something about living for Jesus and about his own crucifixion that has to do not just with the shape of a cross, which we have at the very center of our church and at our Thanksgiving display, but also with the shape of a tree being important and what a tree looks like.

[1 : 2 2] And so here's a picture of a tree that's just died, but out of which new life is growing. And this is what a writer, Danielle Strickland, says about this.

Out of dead things, life grows. Why is it that we're so afraid to die? Spending time outdoors continues to amaze and convince me that in the great ecosystem of God's design, nothing is wasted.

We hold ourselves back convinced that the only thing that matters is us, our lives, our time, our impact. When in reality we can give ourselves fully into what God invites us to, because it's a long view of God's kingdom.

I'm one part of a moving, intricate, creative plan that grows life and life to the full. Let's trust in God's plan. Relax into all that he has planned, because we're going to flourish.

So, yeah, just leaving that image up there for a bit longer. It's quite an amazing and thick and beautiful tree. And, well, my sermon title this morning is called To Bear Fruit, but the alternative title is Don't Be Afraid to Die.

[2 : 3 3] I thought it would be better to go with a slightly more positive one than the, you know, the negative one. Or maybe it would be more Presbyterian to go for the negative one, I don't know. Anyway, but the reality of Christian living is that we bear fruit for God.

So, whatever way that is for us, you know, we all are made in God's image. We all have something to offer. We all have something really important. But alongside that thought of bearing fruit for God and for Jesus in our lives as Christians, comes with that is the acceptance of dying.

And this is what Alistair, you know, no doubt would have shared last week from Mark's Gospel, where Jesus says to the crowds that were around him and his disciples, that whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it. Whoever loses their life for me and the Gospels will save it. So what Jesus is really saying is that if we really want to live, then we first got to die.

Die to yourself, our own wants, our desires, our needs. And it's then that Jesus comes into us, our hearts, into our lives, and that he comes alive in us. That we shine for Jesus, as we've just sung there.

[3 : 40] And that whenever we see a stump growing, that's where God sees a lot more. And he provides for us a tree growing with life inside of us. His life comes into us and thrives when we thrive in him.

But it begins first with laying down our lives for Jesus and taking up our cross. Bearing fruit for Jesus is about taking up our cross for him. And I wonder how this makes you feel.

How does it all sound, just about dying to self? And is it some sort of vague, overly pious, overly spiritual? That's for the higher echelon of Christian believers, but not for ordinary me.

That's the way I've certainly felt for a period of my Christian life. Does it make us feel uncomfortable? It makes me feel uncomfortable because I want my own way and all of that.

But according to the Bible, there's only one answer to the question of how do we live our lives for Jesus. And that's death. We look to the death of Jesus as a way of life.

[4 : 38] New life for ourselves. New beginnings. New openings. So that we would bear fruit with Christ in our heart. Christ in our lives. Christ at the center leading us and guiding us forward.

So this is leading us on to our passage then this morning. Where Jesus has a conversation with the disciples about the harvest. But what's he getting at exactly? What's he referring to?

What are they all asking him? Well, if we're to look through what's just happened in John chapter 4. Well, it's the famous story of the woman who meets Jesus at the well. And Jesus should be associating with her.

She's a sinner. And Jesus exposes her sin. But he does so in a way that doesn't condemn her, judge her, or stone her. Which would have been the viable option for the time.

Rather, Jesus offers her something to drink from this well. But it's not just a physical drink. It's a spring of water welling up to eternal life. What Jesus offers her is new life from his heart to hers.

[5 : 38] From God's heart. It's a divine offer of God's grace and mercy and love. And as the result of this encounter that she had with Jesus, this woman, well, she had come to the well to gather some water.

But she ended up leaving her jug behind, her jar, her water jar. And she left it. I mean, could you imagine leaving something as beautiful as this? I mean, Irving would certainly give you a telling off.

But she left the jar behind. And she went into the town. And she said to the people there, come and see a man, as we just said with the kids. Who's told me everything that I ever did. Could this be the Messiah? And she was in awe of Jesus and who he was.

And the crowd soon come with her to see who he's all about. And the disciples' reaction, though, as we find in the verses leading up to today's passage, is something more of a bewilderment.

And John is masterfully telling this to us as a storyteller. And yes, they were surprised to see Jesus talking with the Samaritan woman. But they don't dare go to Jesus with their questions.

[6 : 39] It says there in verse 27 that no one asks, what do you want? Or why are you talking with her? They don't dare ask the questions. But they return from town. And instead of noticing what's going on, this transformation in this woman's life, this joy that she experiences, Jesus, and the crowds who are coming and gathering around, they instead urged Jesus to move on.

Okay, Jesus, we've had your woman. I've seen you talking with that woman. We know you shouldn't have. Let's just move on. And they say, Rabbi, let's go somewhere to eat. Let's go for a Mackey D's. Or let's get an apple, you know, a bit healthier.

And let's just move on. Okay, we've done our bit here. You've had your time. You've got a lot of things to do, Jesus. But just like Jesus had said to the woman that the offer of water to her was one that would never make her thirsty again, then he responds to his disciples by saying that his food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.

Well, last week, when we had our purpose swap, no doubt you'll have really enjoyed Alistair ministering to you. And I was across at Kilmure and Loke Easter, part of the breakfast church that they have there.

And it's in the Merkat Centre. And we had a little bit of discussion around tables about following Jesus and about being a disciple of Jesus. And we were discussing around the five marks of mission.

[7 : 56] And I wonder if anyone here would know about the five marks of mission, what they are. This isn't a test, by the way. This is not to make anyone feel guilty for not knowing what they are or anything about them.

Well, if you were to go onto the Church of Scotland website, in the About Us and Our Faith section, you'll read this in the opening paragraph, that central to the Church of Scotland is our love and worship of God through following the teachings and examples of Jesus Christ.

We express our love for God by our love and practical care for each other and for those we live with and encounter in our daily lives. Well, I think all Christians would agree with that statement.

The page then goes on to describe that we're a Presbyterian church, what the Church of Scotland's role in the community is, how we worship, that we're a broad church, we have different ways of worshipping. And as well, it then goes on to speak about the five marks of mission, saying that the General Assembly of October 2020 endorsed the five marks of mission, agreeing that for the Church to be fit for purpose in the 21st century, these five marks must be evidenced at local, regional and national levels.

So here are the five marks of mission on the screen now. To proclaim the good news of the Kingdom. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers.

[9 : 12] To respond to human need by loving service. To seek to transform unjust structures of society. To challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation.

To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation. And sustain and renew the life of the earth. So basically that all we do, from our proclaiming and teaching of the good news of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God, to our nurturing of others, to our response to the needs around us by serving as Jesus did, by the bold aim of acting justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with our God.

And our efforts to care for creation are seen as one whole and broad picture of discipleship, of following Jesus, of being an apprentice of Jesus.

And the primary focus of Jesus in this passage is, it's not of that of physical food, as good as that is, and as much as I love physical food as you can tell. But Jesus is saying here, that this is one of many occasions where he's going to use food as an analogy of doing God's will.

And along with these five marks of mission, we can say, well, what's the will of Jesus? What's the mission of Jesus? That it's really to obey his Father, by going to seek and to save the lost, to serve others, in the way Jesus did, and that Jesus, he was the one who gave his life as a ransom, that he came to provide for the needs of those around him, and that we come and we display the kingdom by living alongside those who are deemed unworthy in society, and that we care for God's good creation.

[10 : 52] So God's heart for our world is an overarching, broad, kingdom, fruitful life. And that's the life that Jesus invites us to, that we lead our lives for him, and we take up our cross and follow him, that we are actually expecting that God is going to be at work around us, that we're going to be expecting that God is going to be at work.

And so we see that around us in our church that God is at work, and today is the day. And we can get it, you know, as we'll see tonight in the passage in Exodus 16, that we can get it wrong, and that the Israelites got it wrong, and they complained, and they grumbled to Moses, saying, well, we were better off in Egypt, where we were, at least we had food there.

And the error we see lies in the human heart, and we shut our eyes, and we shut our ears to God. But as the theologian John Webster puts it, every day is God's today, the day when he speaks his word of mercy, and when we respond by listening to him.

And although these five marks of mission might seem like a big, you know, commitment, a big thing to adhere to, to try to live for, well, first of all, we expect God to be at work around us, because we believe in a big God, a sovereign God, a God who's merciful, a creator God, and a God who calls us, who invites us to call him Father.

And what we cannot do on our own, God certainly can, and we come into the hands of the one who is called his precious son, Jesus, who invites us to bear fruit for him that we might truly live.

[12 : 25] I wonder, in seeing these five marks of mission, what do we need to see for ourselves today? What grabs us? What grabs our heart? And what might we say in response to the five marks of mission that speaks to our hearts, the way that God has made us, and that we, alongside seeing that five marks of mission, would say, I'm going to be expecting that God will be at work around me, and in me, and through me.

Here's an example of this. Dan is a guy who makes furniture, beautiful bespoke furniture, and he's got a red brick workshop nestled in the corner of his garden. It's next to his kid's trampoline, a metal scooter, and yellow squish handles lean against it.

But it was here, in the corner of his garden, that Dan realized that God really does provide. You wouldn't know it from the craftsmanship, but Dan's never had any formal training, and much of his learning comes from just trying stuff out and from prayer, because he regularly finds himself saying to God, well, God, you're physically going to have to help me with this.

And quite often, God obliges. And one day, Dan was trying to work out how to create a metallic effect within those small crevices that you get in the knots of burnt oak. And this experiment would involve melting some pewter in a pan.

But there was a problem. Dan didn't have a pan. And with four kids and a wife who was fully occupied with them, money was pretty tight. And so going out to buy a pan that he would only use once, it wasn't really an option.

[13 : 55] Nor was half-inching a pan from the kitchen, because once you've melted metal in a pan, you can't just wash it up and say, well, it's a spaghetti hoops for the kids' dinner. And so Dan prayed. Well, he says that he did, sort of.

He says, I don't even know if I prayed exactly. I just said to God, well, this is something I'd like to do. And I didn't need this for survival. It wasn't even for a specific job that I was working on.

I just wanted to learn a new process that I could use in the future. And moments later, literally moments later, as he crossed the garden back to the house, he noticed something that on the other side of the fence adjacent to his house was a skip.

Now, this wasn't unusual. Dan's house sat between a small industrial estate and a working farm. And the skip, well, acted as a graveyard pretty much for deceased tractor parts.

But on this particular day, laying atop dead stardom waters, well, yeah, I don't know if you've seen that in your experience, maybe, and badgered seats, was an old pan.

[14 : 59] And it was exactly what Dan needed. And he said, God's provided for me so many times, but this incident particularly stands out. It was such a small thing, but it was so specific. It was God saying, I love you, and I want to give you good things.

It showed me that he was interested in the creative process that I was working through. And he cared about me not taking something from the family in order to do it. He really is my provider.

For I know the patterns I have for you, declares the Lord. So the disciples, if we go back to the story here, they don't really see the details as much as Jesus wants them to because they're urging Jesus to move on to eat something, let's get something to eat and let's move on with our time.

And, Jesus responds to them directly in verse 35 where he says this, sorry, don't you have a saying, it's still four months until harvest.

I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields. They are ripe for harvest. Jesus is pointing to the truth that God cares for his disciples in all of the details of their lives and that they should care about that too and just take a moment to recognize in the details where God is at work and that the time in between sowing and at the earliest point of harvest, that time in between there, that's just as important as the sowing and the harvesting itself.

[16 : 23] But Jesus also notes in this passage that it is harvest time and that the disciples, they shouldn't have seen it, they should have been ready for it, but they haven't. They were too quick to motor on with what they wanted to do.

And as Jesus is expectant of his father being at work, the God who calls us already goes before us. So if we thought earlier about seeing the five marks of mission and seeing about being expectant of God to be at work among us, well, the God who calls us is already going before us.

He's already begun at work. And if we wait on what we think God's timing might be or wondering when God's timing could be, then maybe we're missing out on what God is already doing in our time, that he is our provider.

He goes before us and that he cares for us, that we cast our burdens on him freely and wholly and that God has great plans and great plans for our lives.

And I wonder just how you've seen God maybe throughout this week hearing this message here today, how has God provided for me in a very small way, in the small things of life, in the ordinary mundane moments?

[17 : 29] And where's God guiding us right now? Are there moments in our lives where maybe we need to stop and just pay attention and say, thank you God, thank you for that little small thing which I didn't notice before, but as we pay attention we see more and more that, in the words of one of the old archbishops of Canterbury, I think it was William Temple, when you pray, coincidences happen and when you don't, well, they don't.

And when we notice God at work in the small areas of our life and we pay attention to these, we see that there are more God-incidences, more coincidences than we see, that the Father who we can be expectant to be at work, that he's already begun that work and the Son has accomplished his Father's work through his death and his resurrection and that the Holy Spirit comes alongside us to empower us for the ongoing work of God.

And so then, just closing off our time this morning, verses 36 to 38, Jesus writes off this mini-sermonet by drawing in the focus of the timing of harvest to bring together the role of both the planter and the reaper.

Jesus says that, you know, open your eyes, look to the fields, they're ripe for harvest. Even now, the one who reaps draws a wage and harvests a crop for eternal life so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together.

And rather than saying, rather than Jesus saying, well, one's more important than the next, one gets more glory than the other, Jesus is bringing a kingdom of God perspective and that's normally meaning that he turns things that we might naturally look at it in the world on its head.

[19 : 02] And Jesus is saying that if we're hungry for God's kingdom to come and his will to be done here on earth as it is in heaven, then the benefits of that are a life that bears fruit where both the sower and the reaper are glad and they are glad together.

And that joy, being a hallmark of John's gospel, is a hallmark of the Christian life that both participate in the work of God, both are expectant of God to be at work, both are joyful that God has begun the work, and both see their part in the work of God's kingdom if their eyes and their ears are fixed upon what is truly valuable, important, and necessary.

So Jesus is speaking here then about spiritual hunger, of the need to proclaim the good news to a fallen world, of the need to nurture fellow believers in a broken world, to respond to human needs in a messy world, to bring God's justice to a divided world, and to keep for his creation in a polluted world.

When Jesus was trying to say this, the disciples heard something else, but Jesus said that he sent them to reap what God has already gone ahead of them for, and what others have already worked for, but that both would share in the harvest, which time is today, God's today is now.

After living for 25 years in the same place, a gentleman called Peter retired, and he moved to a town, but he didn't know anyone.

[20 : 32] And there were a lot of things that he could do, he had a lot of different gifts, he could preach, he could teach, and he could counsel, but he prayed and he asked God, what do you want me to do? And that was a brave and humble prayer, and the Lord brought Jeremiah 29, 7 to Peter's mind, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile.

And Peter wondered, well how can I bless the town that God has brought me to? So he prayed over a period of time again, and the Lord told him, pick up some litter, Peter.

So he went to the council, and he asked them for a litter picking claw, which they gave to him on a permanent loan. And so on his two mile daily walk, Peter praised God for his world, and he picked up litter at the side of the road, putting it in a plastic bag.

And as he passed by, people he would smile and say, hello, morning. Pretty soon people would say hello back, and little conversations began. Months passed by, people would ask, well why are you doing this?

And he said, well because God loves the world that he's made. And then people would inquire, well you're getting paid for it, surely. And he would say no, and one person responded, well that's a thankless job, and you'll get to heaven for that.

[21 : 45] And Peter replied, well my hope in getting to heaven is that I know Jesus who gave his life for me. And then during Easter week, Peter would hand out gifts to those that he said hello to.

A little cross, just like Aileen makes, that were actually from olive wood, from Israel, to remind us that Jesus died on a tree, and that he rose again.

And some people came to the church meetings as a result, and all Peter did was pick up some rubbish at the side of the road. Or was it? Well, Peter demonstrated God's character and kindness.

He took the initiative to minister to strangers. He changed the culture, yeah, of his local area. It became a friendlier place. He became a mouthpiece for God's concern for creation.

And he was able to proclaim the good news in a very gentle and non-prooperative way. I was greatly moved when I heard that story. And really, whatever side of the story we're on, we all have an important role to play.

[22 : 51] Some of us help hungry people hear about Jesus. Some of us help uninterested people become hungry. Some of us reap the fruit of those who have gone before.

And you may remember a few weeks ago when I mentioned the Reverend Norman Affrin and his church, seeing a whole household come to faith as well as others. And they had a beautiful baptism service out in Loch Lomond. It's one of many stories around the country at present.

Just last week, Reverend Innes McSween from the new Tornograin Community Church, the church plant of Snifton Free Church, he shared last week of how he had the privilege and joy of baptising three men and a baby.

It wasn't a film. But all aged from six months up to 79 years old. And he also saw three others professing faith and taking the Lord's Supper as new members of the church all in their 30s.

A fellow colleague of mine in the Church of Scotland, Reverend Jade Ablietner, I'm sure I'm not pronouncing her name right, I never have been able to since she got married, but she's got five new members joining her church today and all of them under 40.

[23 : 58] You know, the fruit of Norman and Innes and Jade's lives, they all bear reality to what Jesus has done and that we're called to bear fruit. Some of us reap, some of us sow, some of us praise, some of us serve, some of us give, some of us, we've all got a part to play.

And you know, when this church was in vacancy, Ian MacLeod so wisely shared about the need for us as a church to bear fruit and to move forward. And today on this Harvest Thanksgiving, we're really thankful that God has moved in our church and that these church doors have stayed open.

And, you know, individually in our lives as Christians, it can be hard, can't it, to bear fruit? There can be times when we think, well, what am I really doing? How am I really serving? What difference will my words make?

I don't have the words. Well, the reality is that the God that we can be expecting to move in and through us is the God who's already gone before us and the God who says to us, fields are quite under harvest.

If you go, I'll be with you and I'll never, never desert you. And I know that as the minister here, I've not just been called to proclaim and to teach God's word as much as I love that. I know that I've been called to bring about change and introduce new things.

[25 : 09] And I know that that's not always the easiest thing to do. It's sometimes not always the easiest thing to be on the receiving end of. But that's the charge I was given. And does it make me feel uncomfortable?

Yep, absolutely. But is it necessary? Yes, it's necessary, isn't it? And we see God at work and I know we've come along and it's really wonderful to see and I thank you for that.

I thank God for that, for his grace, that he would use a silly plonker like me. I'm not saying that to be self-deprecating, well maybe a little bit. But I am thankful that God goes before us and that he gives us the courage.

If I could look back to when I was about 16 or 17, could I even imagine myself having the confidence to share, to speak in the front? Well, no. And you can say that to many a minister. But God goes before us and the question that I keep wanting to ask myself is, do I want to bear fruit in my life for Jesus?

Do we want to bear fruit in our lives for Jesus? Then, well, it's going to mean taking a risk. And I wonder sometimes if I, just looking at the big picture of things, do I underestimate the size of the harvest?

[26 : 16] Well, yeah, I do, don't I? And don't we? We can do that. You know, we can hear statistics and figures, and I can say about different members becoming, you know, people becoming members of different churches, or I can say that 95% of people, according to the Scripture Union website, do not come to church or have any engagement with church.

And we hear this, but actually, if we're honest, sometimes it just washes over us because it feels so overwhelming. But the reality is, if the Bible is real and Jesus has risen from the dead, which I believe he has, and that the Bible is true, then the wheels are ripe for harvest, and that the time for that is now.

Not three years down the line, but now, and to really go for it. And so then, as I mentioned, just as Bethany was screaming about the sermon I finished off with in Nehemiah last July, this is what I said, that we need to embrace the reality that church going forward is going to be messy, dysfunctional, challenging, but if we're to seek to reach out to those in our community, then, well, I'll just leave that there.

Are we going to embrace that and keep moving forward? That we'll say, I'm going to do anything to get people hearing the good news of Jesus.

I'll be willing to put my reputation, the church's reputation, on the line to say, if it's for the glory of Jesus, then, yeah, let's do it.

[27 : 50] And I know there are seasons, of course, there are times to move forward, times to pause and to reflect, just as the disciples needed to do too, and times where, of course, we need to journey through it together. But as we make inroads in the time, which we are making, then may we not come with fear and trepidation, but with faith and expectancy that the God who is above us and over us and who's gone before us will equip us for the days ahead that we can truly rally our strength and rely 100% on the God who gives us that strength.

And as we're just about to sing, let's trust in the Lord, giving him our hearts, leaning not on our own understanding, and that for all our days, let's submit our plans to God so that we'll be like a tree planted by running streams.

We won't be afraid when a year of dry descents because we'll bear plenty fruit in each season because God is at work. He's gone before us and the harvest is exceedingly abundant.

So what do we need to lose of ourselves, of our structures, in order to say new life is coming because Jesus is at work?

Let's pray together briefly. God, we thank you that you can work in any and through all of us. And we thank you that we've all got a part to play.

[29 : 12] We thank you that the significance of those stories from Dan and from Peter from seeing God at work in the details of our lives and the ordinariness of living for Jesus as well as seeing the fruit that can be born from something as simple as picking up litter.

So Lord, whatever you have in store for us, whatever you have in store for us individually, corporately, and nationally as your church, would you lead us and guide us and would we hear your call for us that the fields are ripe for harvest.

And we thank you, God, that your plans for us are greater than we can ever imagine. And we thank you that you've already gone before us, that you've already begun the work. And we thank you, too, for the faithfulness of so many here in this congregation and for those who have gone before us and that their prayers are still alive today, those prayers of saying, come, Lord Jesus, have your way, move by your kingdom and empower.

May that be our cry, the cry of our hearts today for here in Invergarden and further afield. For this we ask, for Jesus' sake and glory. Amen. Amen.