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**Sunday 4 October to Sunday 11 October**

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Sunday 4 October 2020

# Stinky fruit

by Pastor Matthew Bishop

**‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance’ (Matthew 21:38).**

Read Matthew 21:33–46

I’ve been in homes where there is a photo on the wall of previous houses the inhabitants lived in. When I asked about it, they recalled memories and soon stepped into well-worn narratives about their life there. The photo is way more than just a decoration; it’s a summary of their history.

The parable in today’s gospel reading might only be a few verses, yet Jesus pretty much summarises the whole Old Testament and history of salvation. Stunning! As soon as Jesus mentioned the landowner building a vineyard, wall, winepress, and watchtower, his listeners would have been transplanted back to the famous Song of the Vineyard in Isaiah 5:1–7 (today’s Old Testament lesson). There God describes how he lovingly built a vineyard of the choicest vines (Abraham’s offspring). It had all the infrastructure it needed to succeed. But the kings and priests in charge failed in their duty to nurture it and keep it healthy. Other gods were tolerated, the people were misled, and the prophets, God’s mouthpieces, were treated shamefully.

The people listening to Jesus, the chief priests and elders, were his opponents. They thought they were properly nurturing the vineyard of God. Never would they have equated themselves with those in Isaiah 5 who are the object of God’s scorn. But bad fruit they are or ‘stinkies’ as the Hebrew more literally describes the bad grapes. Within days, these stinkies will take God’s son outside the city walls and kill him (Matthew 27:32–37).

It’s a grim parable for a Sunday. Where’s the good news in it?

It speaks on a couple of levels, at least. Graciously, there is a warning for all who would be teachers in Christ’s church. They need ever to be faithful to God’s word to not be or produce stinkies. Beyond that, though, all of us hear how God’s judgement has fallen on Jesus murdered outside the walls for our transgressions, including the takeover of God’s truths. And out of that? We now live in the promise that the kingdom of God has been restored to us through Jesus’ death. And even more, we are given the privilege of producing his fruit (Matthew 21:43). Jesus, the cornerstone (Matthew 21:42), is not going anywhere. He will keep us grounded as we build on him. Blessings in Christ as you make that your picture.

**Lord Jesus, our cornerstone, we believe that by your death, you have forgiven us for the stinky fruit we produce. By your Holy Spirit, keep us grounded in your word, so that in response we may yield your good fruit in the week ahead. In your name, we pray. Amen.**

Monday 5 October 2020

# The tender love of Jesus

by Pastor Matthew Bishop

**‘Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me’ (Song of Solomon 2:13).**

Read Song of Solomon 2:10–15

I have a pastor friend who likes to get people’s attention, especially young adults, by saying words to the effect of, ‘Let me tell you about the sexiest book of the Bible’.

Well, I guess that got your attention! Indeed, if you are reading your LCA devotion first thing Monday morning, you might be wondering if this isn’t too raunchy? Well, apart from God knowing more about companionship, marriage, love, and sexual expression than we ever will, through the millennia, Song of Solomon has also been used by people searching out a deeper spirituality with God. That’s because Song of Solomon describes to us the fullness of God’s provision for us – body, soul, and mind. Its vivid description of God’s bounty is something God invites us to savour intimately.

Today’s text speaks of winter being replaced by the glorious singing of the spring day, with flowers appearing and doves cooing. And so, the lover says to his beloved (verse 14):

My dove in the clefts of the rock,
in the hiding places on the mountainside,
show me your face,
let me hear your voice;
for your voice is sweet,
and your face is lovely.

Not everyone feels comfortable with such words ascribed to how Jesus feels about us. To be sure, it’s as a brother or a sister (Romans 8:17) and in the purest of forms that Jesus sees us (1 Timothy 5:1b–2). Yet, he loves us tenderly. He wants us always to know that. In him, ‘truly our face is lovely’, whether you believe it or not!

**Lord Jesus, you make us lovely. That’s because we have your loveliness handed over to us in the ugliness of Calvary’s cross. As we read Song of Solomon, help us to appreciate anew just how much you adore us and how much you wish us to know you ever closer. In your beautiful name, we pray. Amen.**

Tuesday 6 October 2020

# The fig grower’s gift

by Pastor Matthew Bishop

**‘I will bring my people Israel back from exile … They will make gardens and eat their fruit’ (Amos 9:14).**

Read Amos 9:13–15

Mr L’bruno\* was our Italian neighbour in the very Italian area of Adelaide I grew up in. Like so many of the good and peaceful folk around us, he was a first-generation post-World War II immigrant. On his little block of Rostrevor clay, he had the most amazing garden full of fruit and veg. Directly on our western fence grew his magnificent fig tree. He hardly spoke any English. It must have been hard for him. I think that’s what might have precluded him from not much more than a wave most of the time. That was until the figs ripened. Then his face would regularly appear over the fence, grinning from ear to ear with a big bag full of ripened figs. While he might not have been able to find the words through the rest of the year, his generous heart expressed through those figs and beaming face showed his true character.

It’s thought that the prophet Amos was a fig grower. While he was clearly capable with words, they were words that were hard to hear. For nine chapters, Amos tells of God’s judgement of pending destruction in response to the unfaithfulness of the Israelites. It must have been hard for Amos to communicate this side of God. Then, suddenly, there he is in the last few verses telling us about God’s generosity. So great will God’s abundance be that the next harvest will follow even before the reaper and the picker can finish their work on the last (verse 13).

The Holy Spirit wants us to know that, ultimately, the return from exile Amos points to is the redeeming work of Jesus, our saviour (verse 14). It is God’s true character and his proper work to be about generously returning us from exile into the abundant kingdom of his grace. Certainly, we may find times of God’s silence and judgement crushing. But as sure as Mr L’bruno handed those big bags of figs kept over the fence, even more so does God’s word of grace pronounce his everlasting favour on us (complete with a big God-grin, I think!).

**Lord God, I thank you for this picture of new wine and robust seasons in the prophecy of Amos. Even as I look forward to your eternal feast, I know that’s only possible because you have brought me back from exile through the gift of your son Jesus’s life. Keep me receiving and sharing him and his Spirit’s fruit. Through him, I pray. Amen.**

\*Name changed

Wednesday 7 October 2020

# God’s saving advice

by Pastor Matthew Bishop

**‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down’ (Luke 13:8–9).**

Read Luke 13:6–9

The terra rossa soils deposited over the beautiful Gilbert Valley of South Australia’s mid-North obviously need a helping hand every so often. I know this because my dad grew up just south of Riverton right in the middle of that sublime place. Dad tells the story of Kenny, his dad, occasionally offering his green-thumb of a mum, Alma, a bit of gratuitous gardening advice: ‘It all needs root’n out and load of dung putt’n in’. Kenny, a gentle, yet simple Englishman, was well-meaning, but it wasn’t necessarily received in the intended spirit by his ever industrious and extremely capable Deutsch wife!

It’s just as well that God is happy to keep hearing the pleas of his master gardener, Jesus, when it comes to us who reside in his fig orchard. Even before the master gardener intercedes, God has already given us ample time (three years in the parable), just as he did the children of Israel. Daily observation. Ever-looking for signs. And just when he has had enough, the son steps in, pleading, ‘Let me dig around and add manure. Don’t cut these unproductive souls out of our orchard. Remember that big Easter weekend, my Father! The nails that dug through my hands and feet. The spear that pierced my heart. Let me feed them with my body and blood. Let the Holy Spirit sew my word in their hearts – he’s great at doing that for us!’

And, yes! For those that have ears to hear and outstretched hands to receive, the Son certainly knows there will be an abundant harvest. For his word will not return to him empty (see Isaiah 55:9–11). Is it time for you to be fed and bear his fruit, then?

**Thank you, Lord God, for planting me to serve you and bear your fruit. I would be lost without your patience. Yet, even as I know you are patient, I know your need for harvest is urgent. Draw me to take your feeding deep through my roots so that your fruit may abound in all I do. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.**

Thursday 8 October 2020

# Chosen by God

by Pastor Matthew Bishop

**‘You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit’ (John 15:16a).**

Read John 15:1–16

I well remember the way the two Aussie Rules teams were picked for Friday afternoon primary school sport. All the Year 4–7 boys that had elected to play footy (no AFLW back then) stood around in a group with the two captains out the front. The picking order was nothing but predictable. The bigger and better players were always chosen first. The punier and weaker boys – mostly the Year 4s – were chosen last. As a puny and pretty rubbish Year 4 footballer, I remember consoling myself with the thought that one day I’ll be a much earlier pick as I grow and get better at the game.

It’s entirely different in God’s kingdom. Jesus has only entirely rubbishy people to choose from: sinners! Indeed, your qualification for getting onto Jesus’s team, which is called his vine in today’s reading, was to have zero strength and skill when it came to doing his will. Yet, choose you he did, for he tells us, ‘You did not choose me, but I appointed you …’ That means he loved you at your worst.

Moreover, don’t we all know that sometimes we despair when we are not growing and getting better at being on his vine? When we feel puny, weak, and rubbishy in our sins (or the sins others have committed against us), Jesus invites us instead to remember that the sap of his word pulsing through us cleanses us (verse 3). So much so that contrary to what we are by ourselves, we will even bear his lasting fruit (verse 16). That continues this very day as you now ask for these things in his name!

**Lord Jesus, our vine, we’d be thrown away and withered without you. Keep us living in the sap of your word, sending your Holy Spirit to teach us all things and remind us of everything you have said to us. In your name, we pray. Amen.**

Friday 9 October 2020

# Still the real thing

by Pastor Matthew Bishop

**‘So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord ... The people of the city were divided’ (Acts 14:3–4a).**

Read Acts 14:1–7

Unless you live in a bubble, avoid all news and only talk to other Christians, then strictly about the good God is doing for you, you’ll know that Christianity is ‘on the nose’ in western culture.

Sometimes I hear Christians gushing about the early church as if it were so much easier then. Maybe they haven’t read the Acts of the Apostles in a while! Today’s reading shows it was anything but easy. People refuse to believe. Then they stir up others and poison their minds against Barnabas and Paul. The word divides. And the apostles find themselves running for their lives, despite the signs and wonders that should have proved the worthiness of their message beyond question. Right?

Three things give me comfort in all of this. You’ll likely have others. The first for me is that it’s always been this way. Thus, I find the difficulty we still face is a confirmation of the genuineness of what we are doing. Secondly, we stand with the Apostles, indeed Jesus himself (see, for example, John 6:60–66), with a message of good news that not everyone will want to believe. Hence, ‘failure’ is more of a reflection of faithfulness than it is a deficiency.  Thirdly, the tools of the trade are still the same: speaking boldly for the Lord (verse 3), and when it’s time to move on, still speaking boldly for the Lord (or ‘proclaiming the gospel’ as verse 7 puts it). So we know what to do! As you go in the gospel, wherever you live or share it, may God comfort you, hardships and all.

**O Holy Spirt, comforter of priceless worth, please keep guiding us to speak boldly for the Lord.  Bless all missionaries. Uphold those who are persecuted and lead those who persecute you to believe in Jesus our Lord. In his name, we pray. Amen.**

Saturday 10 October 2020

# Even in the presence of my enemies

by Pastor Matthew Bishop

**‘You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows’ (Psalm 23:5).**

Read Psalm 23

Not every enemy can be seen and heard. Mid-year, I officiated the funeral of a lady in her late 90s plagued by depression all her life. That’s a long time. It had taken a toll on both her and her loved ones. Like a steady drip, her illness had undermined stability in her relationships and outlook. Yet, in the way she lived her life, there was also much evidence of abundance. Sport, fun, and a sense of adventure helped to even things up.

As I wrote her funeral homily based on Psalm 23, I was reminded of just how much God provides for us in the presence of our enemies – whatever they are! For example, in depressive illnesses, the little gifts of joy God gives, when deliberately coupled with thanksgiving, can speak powerfully to interrupt the emptiness of the lived experience that is depression. Likewise, other ills, such as physical sickness, social exclusion, or broken relationships, can also feel like enemies. God interrupts that suffering, too, with various gifts where we have eyes and faith to see it.

Yet, as good as God’s provision for our bodies and minds is, it’s God’s soul-provision that overflows our cups in a different and ultimately better way: eternally. Jesus Christ is not just the Good Shepherd. He is also the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. By his birth, life, cross, and empty grave, he has given his sheep the green pasture beside his still water. Only goodness and mercy reign there. He invites us to make that gift our greatest joy. May we receive it with thanks, enemies and all.

**Lord Jesus Christ, you are my good shepherd. I believe that you give me everything I need. Jesus, remind me of that when it seems my enemies are getting the better of my situation. Strengthen me in your Holy Spirit through who, together with you and your Father, I pray this prayer. Amen.**

Sunday 11 October 2020

# A fitting response

by Kathy Matuschka

**‘The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son’ (Matthew 22:2).**

Read Matthew 22:1–14

This week we consider the question: what is a fitting response to God’s generous invitation to join ‘the banquet’?

What sort of a person doesn’t accept an invitation to a royal wedding? Today, one would assume that such a person was a republican; someone who does not accept the king’s authority and prefers to keep open his or her options for whom they will follow.

In today's story, the king starts by inviting the most obvious guests to his son’s wedding. But he’s not put off in his intention to hold a banquet when they decline his invitation and even kill his messengers.

The king is prepared to invite anyone and everyone. They needn’t worry that they don’t have something suitable to wear because the king will even supply their outfit.

As recipients of such generosity, what are the guests expected to do in response? Simply accept his generosity. One man prefers a little autonomy and wears his own clothes. The trouble is that what he chooses to wear will never get him into the great hall.

Of course, the king in this story represents God, and the banquet is God’s kingdom, both here on earth and in heaven forever. Those who first heard this parable would have known that those invited first were the Jewish people and that the messengers represented their prophets, whose voices the people had rejected.

God invites us to the banquet and provides what we need to join the feast: we are clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. What is a fitting response to God’s generosity?

We simply turn up. This week will consider some ways we can ‘turn up’ as residents of God’s kingdom.

**Dear loving God, I know that there is no way I can ever repay your invitation to ‘the banquet.’ Nevertheless, I pray that you will help me to grow in my loving response to your kindness. In Jesus’ name, Amen.**