

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera Qld

28th July 2024 – Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Ephesians 3:14-21

LIVING AND GROWING IN GOD'S LOVE

When we think the beauty and grandeur of nature, with all of its colour, complexity, and variety, it is perhaps natural that our thoughts might often first of all go to those areas in which the elements needed for life, food, water, light, are there in just the right balance so that everything which lives there can easily thrive and grow to be all it was intended to be. In a lush environment like a rainforest, we may think, we will find the beauty and grandeur of nature as God created it.

But in much more harsh environments, where the battle can be just to survive, let alone trying to thrive, incredible beauty can be found also. I have shared with you before about the amazing river red gums which are found in central Australia. You will find these large trees often growing in dry riverbeds which may run once or twice a year and then just for a few days at a time. Growing in these riverbeds these trees have to have a very large and deep root system; firstly, so they can reach down deep enough to get the water they need in what is normally a very harsh and hot environment. And secondly because when water does flow through these riverbeds it can flow very fast and high; walking through the gorges the riverbeds pass through and looking up it is amazing to see the signs of the heights of some previous flows. In an environment in which survival itself is an achievement, these trees survive to become beautiful and majestic witnesses to their Creator, and to support many other forms of life also.

But walking through those riverbeds and gorges and looking up, there is another example of the beauty which can exist in a place where we wonder how it can survive. In many of these gorges, literally growing out of rocky cracks, are beautiful ghost gums. As we wonder at not only how they hold on and don't fall over, but where they find the food and water to both live and grow, we are also struck by the beauty of their white trunks as it contrasts with the red rock, the green foliage, and the crisp blue sky.

Obviously, they have a strong and effective root system, but how? How do they not only survive, but also thrive to be such an amazing witness to the power and majesty of God?

Whenever I read or hear words from the Bible referring to being ground or rooted in God's love, I think first of all, naturally, about trees, but on this occasion for some reason even more so about those trees in the harsh environments in central Australia. These are trees which, almost miraculously to us, are not just surviving but also thriving; a beautiful witness to the glory of God's creation, and, just as importantly, not only surviving and growing themselves but also supporting many other forms of life to live and grow also. If you think about it, if you picture those trees, what they are doing illustrates what Paul writes about this reading here. They show what it is to stand firm and to be deeply rooted (17b); for them in the rocky cracks which give stability and hold just enough nutrients and soil, and for us in God's love which provides what we need in life. They also receive all they need from above, there is nothing coming up to them from below, in the same way that in the Holy Spirit coming down to us we receive what we need to both live and grow in our faith. And then also, for me, walking through the gorges and seeing those ghost gums growing in seemingly impossible conditions, in both their strength and their beauty it's almost impossible not to be caught up in how these living things and those places are an amazing witness to the love and power of God. And we too, being filled with God's love, are called to bring praise to Him. Living in God's love, growing in God's love, sharing God's love, bringing praise to God because of His love.

Life's not always full of abundance, plain sailing, an easy path, is it? It can be tough. It can be a struggle. That's why as much as I love a rainforest with all its lush abundance, I also love the harshness of more arid environments which still support so much life. And I think that, quite often, the dry riverbed or the rocky slope can better describe the situations in which we try to live and grow in our spiritual lives than can the place with the soil which is rich, deep and well-watered. Do you ever feel like you are struggling to cling on to God's love, to His promises? Do you ever feel like you want to get your roots down further but you just can't find the crack, the way, to get in there? Do you ever feel like you are hanging over the edge of the rockface, balancing in a way that you don't know why you haven't toppled over yet?

And what brings us to feel like this? In this reading God's love for us is described as being 'wide or long or high or deep' (18b). Sounds like the perfect soil to really get our roots down and get all we need, doesn't it? So why do we often feel like this doesn't happen? Well, life comes in, with not just the things which give us hope and joy, but also those which can cause us to struggle. The worries we have about our family. The conflicts we have with other people, or the relationships which maybe aren't the way we wished they were. Grief over the death of those close to us, no matter how long ago they died. Struggles with our faith because of what we see, hear, or read about what is going on around us; 'how can you let that happen, God?' Things we have done that we find it hard to accept God's forgiveness for, or which we know are wrong, but we just can't stop doing. Things we worry about in our lives. The feeling sometimes that having faith in God doesn't fit into our modern world, and being afraid to speak up about your faith and beliefs because you are worried about the reaction you might get. Of course, there are the times when we feel our faith and spiritual life is growing in a lush and fertile rainforest. But at others we might feel like we are having to reach down further and further into a dry riverbed, or hold on tighter to the side of a rocky wall.

For those trees growing on the side of those rocky walls, what they need to live and grow has to come to them from above, it's not coming from anywhere else. It's the same for us in our spiritual lives. In the first place, and most importantly, because God knew that in our world we would go through all of these things and more, and to pay the price for our forgiveness and to bring us back to Him, God sent Jesus, His Son, down to us. It's put very well here, 'All beings in heaven and on earth receive their life from him. God is wonderful and glorious. I pray that his Spirit will make you become strong followers and that Christ will live in your hearts because of your faith. Stand firm and be deeply rooted in his love.' (15-17) God comes down to us, through Jesus, through the Holy Spirit. God comes down to give us what we need to stay strong, to put our roots down, to hold on to the edge when we feel we can't do that anymore. God comes down to give us not just what we need to survive, but to grow in our faith and our work in Him.

This happens in many ways, but to help us God does this in very real and tangible ways for us also. In baptism, by ordinary water (so important for any life) through the power of God's Word the Holy Spirit works to join us to Jesus' dying and rising again and all that now means for us. Through Holy Communion,

in things of life, bread and wine, that we eat and drink, by the Holy Spirit coming down we are joined to the new life we have in Jesus, and given the assurance and strength we need to go through both the joys and highs of life, and also the dry and harder times.

And this is all done both for our good, and to God's glory. Again, when we see the beauty of God's creation, wherever it is, we marvel, worship and praise Him. As His people, working together in His kingdom, it is our call to bring praise to God in the way we show and share His love to others. We play a part in God's love coming down. We play a part in God's love coming to people when they feel like they are struggling in any way. As this reading finishes, 'His power at work in us can do far more than we dare ask or imagine' (21b). That is our strength, our assurance, and our call; that in all we do we do it by God's love and His power at work in us, and we do it to bring praise to Him.

There may well be times in our faith and our spiritual lives when we feel like we are growing in the rich, moist, deep soils of a rain forest. At other times we might feel that we are in a dry dusty riverbed, having to go down deeper and deeper to find what we need, and always at risk of being washed away. And then, there are the times we can relate to the tree growing on the side of a rocky wall, struggling to hold on, reaching out to get what we need. At all times, in our lives, we have God coming down to us, encouraging us to stay grounded in His love for us, and promising us that when we do so He gives us all we need. It is a love in which we don't just survive, but in which each day we can be living and growing in Him. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- Can you relate your spiritual life to trees growing in different environments? If so, which ones, or ones, fit you best? What you think makes you feel like this?
- In our reading we are assured that God in His love comes down to us, giving us all we need. How do you feel God's love at work in your life? Are there times when you find it difficult to feel?
- When are the times, or situations, that you struggle in your spiritual life? Pray about these. Reflect on the call to ground yourself in God's deep and unending love; how does this make it different for you? Think also about your baptism, and the times you receive Holy Communion, and what this means for you in your faith and life.

Pray: thank God for giving us all we need in our lives, including His love in which we can firmly ground our faith. Pray that we can also be strong in Him and bring glory to Him through our lives.

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