

Dear Friends,

In the middle of the lawn outside the block of flats where I live there used to be a fine tall pear tree. In the early spring it produced masses of creamy blossom that did not last long, and then later in the year it would bear juicy tasty fruit - or at least some years it did and others it didn't. There did not seem to be any particular reason why it fruited one year and not the next. Life is often a mystery!

One night in the early hours there was a loud crashing sound outside, but being pitch dark we could not see what had happened. The next morning, we found that a large part of the tree had snapped off and fallen on the grass. When the gardeners came to examine it they found that, although it looked healthy it was decayed in large part and could not be saved, so they cut it down and chopped up the remains and now there is only the stump of the tree to remind us of the delicious pears.

I was thinking of the pear tree the other day when going by a small green nearby which has a large oak tree in the middle of it. It really is quite a monster and last summer, when in full leaf, it was a magnificent sight. But oh dear it now looks very sad, being ruthlessly cut back to just a skeleton of what it was. I guess that like the pear tree it had decayed and perhaps grown too big for its system to cope with. At least being cut back it has been saved, and will grow again and return to its former glory.

Pruning, as gardeners will know, is often necessary for new life to emerge. On my one and only visit to the USA we stayed at a retreat-house on a small island off the coast of Connecticut. The priest in charge suggested one day we might go and look at his vines, of which he was very proud. Like the diminished oak tree, they did not look much, the grapes being small and shrivelled, but it was just after the vines had been pruned, and these little wizened shoots would now be able to grow and produce usable grapes.

In the Gospel reading for this Sunday Jesus calls himself the vine and ourselves the branches of the vine. It is almost as if we are not just followers of Christ, but part of the same organism of which he is the heart and center. Indeed, I believe that this is what really makes us Christians: not so much that we believe certain things or take part in certain practices and rituals, but that we are *in Christ* (the regular expression St. Paul uses), we are sharers in the human-divine life that is in Christ himself. In order to grow more into what we

can be, therefore, we need to remain in him, as he remains in us, and this will sometimes mean undergoing the necessary pruning which his word can bring about. This may not be easy - pruning can be painful - but it is necessary if we are to live anew.

In this Easter season we often see how the first followers of Jesus could not comprehend that he had moved into a new way of being (the resurrection life), because they were still caught up with the past, remembering the Jesus who had died, regretting the end of all the hopes and dreams they had placed in him. They needed to let go of these dead bits in themselves in order to know him alive again and so make it possible for themselves to enter the new life.

There is a strange psychological or spiritual tendency that sometimes occurs to people, whereby they almost prefer to remain stuck in the past, in what has died in them, because it is what is most familiar to them - and we are always happiest with the familiar, rather than taking the risk of launching out into the unknown. As one writer puts it, it is almost as if we are more afraid of resurrection than we are of death. But although it seems a risky venture, God tells us over and over that with him we need not be afraid. We can let go of our familiar anchors and set off into the deep, confident and trusting that God will lead us and guide us into more of his life and love. This is always God's desire, that we should know him more and more deeply and so live our God-given lives more fully, here and hereafter. And this will sometimes mean undergoing the difficult experience of having what has died in us be removed.

We all I imagine have parts of ourselves that have really died, but which we hold on to because they are comfortingly familiar - memories, attitudes, ways of thinking and feeling that we need to let go of because they are holding us back. What will give us the faith and confidence to do this is to remain in Christ, rooted in him through our prayer, through the sacraments, through the events of our lives which teach us how to let go.

One more tree to tell you about! At Kew Gardens there is an enormous hybrid oak-tree, a variety which has leaves like those of the chestnut tree, which like the nearby oak is wondrous to behold when in full leaf. Because it stands on its own near the Orangery it is strikingly visible. I was there one day when some men working around the tree told me there was another specimen of this type not far off, closely surrounded by other trees so that it does not appear so readily, but, they said, is even larger. It is one of the biggest trees in the whole country. During the great storm of 1987, when Kew lost a large number of its

trees, this one remained intact with not a twig out of place. The secret of course it is that has very deep strong roots which keep it secure. We need to sink our roots in Christ, remaining closely in him as the branches of his vine. If we can do this and let go of our dead bits, we can live more deeply, more richly, and bear abundant fruit until we come to the fullness of what we are made to be in God's eternal kingdom.

Wishing you every blessing, Fr. Robin.