

What does renewal look like?

In an era of declining attendances in mainstream denominations in Australia and New Zealand, it's easy to be discouraged by the cry that the church is dying. Some in the LCA say we must hold firm to our traditions in order to survive; others believe change is critical. There is a call for renewal. But is renewal something we instigate, or is it what God and his Spirit does in his church? And what does it really mean? As we reflect through Lent in the lead-up to the ultimate story of renewal – the resurrection, Pastor Noel Due explores what renewal means for the future of the church. And he finds it in a vineyard.

My forebears started growing grapes in the Barossa Valley in South Australia about 170 years ago.

Nearly 200 years into winemaking in Australia, we've learned a bit. If my long-dead relatives could return, they'd be flabbergasted at the mechanised, industrialised, and drip-irrigated world our vineyards have become.

Not that any of that is bad. I reckon my grandfather would be pretty envious. But moving from hand, horse and homestead to motors, machinery and multinationals as the means of production hasn't changed what's actually happening. The basics are still the same.

Ploughing, planting, pruning, and picking are still essential. And of course the other things: weed and pest control; frost and fungus protection; and an experienced eye to read the vines and the weather.

But, even after the harvest, there's still more.

Crushing and fermenting, filtering and fining, ageing and bottling. Then selling to all parts of the globe. There's no point in growing premium Barossa shiraz or cabernet unless you do those things. And no return on your investment.

Vines and vineyards are long-standing biblical images.

Yet, when you look at it, the emphasis is not on the vine or the vineyard as things in themselves. The Owner is always the main one in the picture.

It is God who plants his vineyard. God who prunes his vine. God who promises a harvest. God who sends showers of rain. And God who uproots, displaces and grafts in new stock.

Nothing in the vineyard imagery lets us settle back in comfort and ease.

From the vine's point of view, it's all pretty tough.

Some vines have to be cut back to the roots, so infected have they become with fungal dieback. Some vineyards are totally ripped up, to be replanted with more vibrant stock, or a different grape variety. The vines are cut into. Grafts are inserted. Pruning is not an optional extra, it's a necessity.

And who'd want to be a bunch of grapes at the end of it all? You only get to look good for a few weeks until it all goes to mush. Stripped from the vine, crushed, and torn to shreds. Death is never pretty. But the wine is amazing!

Why all this?

Because that's what renewal looks like.

It looks like that wherever you encounter it in the Bible, and it looks like that wherever you encounter it in church history.

Every year – vintage upon vintage – we witness an enacted parable of the way God deals with his people, for the sake of the world.

It's not for nothing that the Holy Spirit is associated with very elemental forces: fire, wind and water chief among them.

The Holy Spirit is 'the Lord, the Giver of Life'. As Lord, he's not under our control. As the Giver of Life, he does everything in conjunction with the Father and the Son to bring life to the world. To bring life to the church, *for the sake of the world*.

We have to be honest. Things are pretty dire in the LCA vineyard. Whichever set of statistics you look at, we're in what some would call terminal decline. We still carry a recognised brand name – Lutheran schools; Lutheran aged care; Lutheran Community Care or Lutheran Services, for example – but at a congregational and parish level it appears that we're heading over a cliff.

Much of my work with congregations and pastors highlights the sense of desperation. How do we keep the doors open? How do we get our missing generations back? How to get more people to join us? What program can we run? Where can we find people to run it? Where will we find a pastor? What if we can't get one? Or afford one?

Try anything. Try everything! Something has to work.

But what if God has us here precisely because this is where we need to be? What if he doesn't want us to fix it, because he's got something else in mind?

What if he is not so interested in keeping the doors open, as to blow us all out of doors into the world? What if his presence is not a cosy fire to warm ourselves, but a blaze to consume the chaff that's clogging our gears? What if he's not so interested in sending showers of blessing on us, but intends to baptise *the world* in the love of his Son?

Is there any gospel here?

Plenty.

The first part is this: *God loves the world so much he will persist* in lopping his church until he's done. The harvest is guaranteed. It's just that we can't get there without the ploughing, pruning, weeding and crushing that produces the wine we enjoy at every Holy Communion.

The second part is this: *God loves the Church so much that the endpoint is far more glorious, satisfying and joyful than anything we could put in its place*. Our security, peace and contentment don't often lie in the places we expect. God has a greater good and a preferred future for us that transcends the twigs and straw we clutch at in the tempest.

The third part is this: *Jesus is the Vine*. Not us. '*I am the Vine, my Father is the Vinedresser*'. Yes, we are the branches of that Vine, but the pruning takes place *in Jesus*. That means that as the shears bite into us, Jesus carries us through. The axe is laid to his root, on the Cross, for our sakes; that we might bear fruit that remains. And that fruit is for the sake of the world he loves.

The fourth part is this: *God loves us more than we love him*. Where we have become dull of hearing, slow of speech, or hard of heart, he loves us enough to break through. He allows circumstances that confound us, so that we might learn to trust him, rather than trusting our ability to fix things. And, as that happens, he opens us up to the fullness of his love we could otherwise never have known.

And the fifth part is this: *this world is not yet heaven*. So much of our anxiety arises because we feel it ought to be, and strive to make it so. But the gospel is a Way. Jesus is *the Way* ... to the Father. That is, God has never intended for us to be settled and secure here because this world is not yet heaven. To change the picture: every boat needs to have the barnacles scraped off so it can still make good headway. God loves us enough to do that.

He's in the business of renewing his people for the sake of the world. We can be sure of that.

Do we trust him?

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What Martin Luther had to say on John 15: I am the Vine, you are the branches

The vine sees the vinedresser, or gardener, coming with his pruning shears and other tools to work around it and says:

'What are you doing? That hurts, don't you know that? Now I must wither and decay, for you are removing the soil from around my roots and are tearing away at my branches with those iron teeth. You are tearing and pinching me everywhere, and I will have to stand in the ground bare and seared. You are treating me worse than any tree or plant.'

And the gardener would then reply: 'You are a fool and do not understand. For even if I do cut a branch from you, it is a totally useless branch; it takes away your strength and your sap. Then the other branches, which should bear fruit, must suffer. Away with it! This is for your own good.'

Then the vine would say: 'But you do not understand! I have a different feeling about it!' The gardener declares: 'But I understand it well. I am doing this for your welfare, to keep the foreign and wild branches from sucking out the strength and the sap of the others. Now you will be able to yield more and better fruit and produce good wine.'

The same thing is true when the gardener applies the cow manure to the root of the vine; this, too he does for the benefit of the vine even though the vine might complain and say: 'What in the world are you doing? Isn't it bad enough for you to hack and cut at me all day long, trimming this cutting off that branch? Why, now are you putting that foul-smelling stuff at my roots?! I am a vine, to yield delicious grapes to make wonderful wine, and you are putting that terrible smelling stuff near me, it will destroy me!'