

I am a summer gardener. When Janet and I lived in Huntly we had a proper sized section and the soil was a metre and a half deep. It was beautiful; dark brown, damp, alluvial river loam, built up over millennia as the Waikato flowed through that place.

In the summer I loved getting my hands in it. It would be warm and crumbly, it smelt of a mountain's memory, and was so full of life it shimmered with potential. In that ground I could grow anything. Tomatoes, lettuces, potatoes, pumpkins, peaches, I even tried my hand at garlic. I grew dahlias and roses, lilies and daisies. Ferns and palms and even a beautiful kauri tree.

Earths crammed with heaven and every bush afire with God!

In the summer I really loved gardening.

In the winter, I couldn't think of anything worse. It was cold, the soil was freezing, it was cloggy and clumped together. The grass was wet, my fingers and body froze, it was damp and unpleasant. I'd see bony wooden fingers pointing in accusation against the grey breath of winter, and feel the icy clamp of hibernation.

So, I didn't garden in the winter. Still don't.

But in the summer, I loved it. I'd get outside with the spade, hoe, rake, sprayer and sectators and go to work. Digging, weeding, tidying and pruning. Some plants you'd need to cut back almost to the bone, for others it would be to keep the leaves off the ground. You'd prune dead leaves, dead flowers, dead branches and sometimes even dead limbs. If done properly, it always resulted in more growth. More fruit or flowers. More health for the plant, shrub or tree.

Some of the cuttings you put in the compost; some you threw over the back fence, and some you needed to burn. You burnt the ones there were prickly and likely to cause damage or harm to someone, if they came across them unawares.

Most of us come to John 15 with some knowledge of this discussion, at least from a practical gardening perspective. We understand a vine grower and a vine, branches and fruit. We get this is a way of understanding how things fit together. It helps us get a picture of how close we are called to be, how reliant the branches are on the vine. The vine is nourishment, food, health and sustenance. We even understand pruning, knowing, that the pain we sometimes experience is not always meant to harm, damage or kill us. Sometimes, it brings growth, fruit, flowers and even health.

But when we get to the branches being thrown on the fire, we pause for breath. For people are not branches, vines are not humans. Fire and humans don't go together. God and fire and humans don't go together. Pruning humans is not like pruning vines. If humans feel the pruning is too severe, they can withdraw, take offence, even choose to go in another direction.

Here our allegory becomes more complex and our gardening and theological knowledge part company.

This is not about God throwing people on a fire. This is not about any idea of eternal punishment. It's about dead branches, and dead branches, are useless.

When John does talk about judgement, he talks about it being in the hands of the judged, rather than the judge. Repeatedly John says that God has placed judgement into the hands of Jesus, and then says that all people are judged by THEIR attitude towards him. "He was in the world, and the

world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.” “I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world but to save the world.”

People, John says, get the chance to hear the words of Jesus, and to know of his being the Son of God, and they get to make up their own minds about that. They can choose to abide or not. To keep abiding, or not.

All of us have in our families, in our circle of friends, or families of friends, people who have chosen, over and over and over again to walk in to the fire of life by the choices they have made, by the decisions they have come too, by the lives they have chosen to lead. They have chosen not to abide in the vine, they have chosen not to stay in the vine, and so they choose themselves, life's fire.

To say that God has done this to them or will do this to them, is a misrepresentation of this passage and this gospel. As in all things, the love of God reaches out to us, calls us, seeks us. The love of God wants to make Godself known to us, in Jesus Christ. If we choose .... To walk another way, that is our choice. Always our choice.

Who knew summer gardening would be so complicated?

Amen.