

Romans 11: 1-24 - Sermon for 8am

I'm not a gardener particularly, but when we moved into our house in Cambridge there was a rose bush in our front garden. It was HUGE for a rose bush and it grew in all different directions and hung down, it's shoots were so long. Come spring time, I was sorely disappointed. There were a few white flowers in a couple of patches amidst the sea of green, spikey stems and leaves. It was time for a reckoning...

It turns out, after a whole world of chopping, that the grafting had gone bad somehow. The beautiful white flowered rose was still there, but lost amidst the wilder rose which was the rootstock. Apparently, it's normal practice when growing roses and apples in fact to graft the rose you want on a more vigorous wild-type rootstock for the plant to flourish. What shouldn't happen, and I still don't know why it did, is the wild rose growing anyway. All the rootstock's energy should go into making my nice white rose plant grow strong.

Olive trees are similar to roses, or were at least in ancient times. They were often grafted onto a strong root to help them grow. Without this grafting, the olive tree would be stunted and sickly and probably not survive very long. This is the picture of Israel's relationship with God in our passage today. The Jews were absolutely dependent upon God for their life and flourishing. But the world has changed drastically and Paul, the author, is trying to articulate this change using this image.

Paul suggests that the Jewish rejection of faith in Jesus has almost created space for the grafting of the non-Jews. Of course, we're not meant to press the image too far since God is limitlessly welcoming to all who have faith in him. However, the point Paul is making is that the graft – the joining point – of the rootstock of God and the branch is faith in Jesus. There is no other type of graft available. We cannot earn our place on the rootstock. We cannot be born into the rootstock and stay there just because our parents did. We, Jews and non-Jews alike, are only grafted in because of faith in Jesus. It is through faith in Jesus that we are nourished by God, that we are supported by him, and that we can bear fruit and flourish in our lives.

There is therefore no merit in belonging. I am no better than any other branch... and no worse either. I cannot boast that I've done anything to deserve my in-grafting, but neither do I have to live in the shadow of another branch – we both share the same graft, and neither of us did anything other than accept God's gift of faith in Jesus.

This grafting in brings both security and humility. Paul says that we can't be proud of our grafting since we didn't earn it. And in light of those who lost their grafting by rejecting Jesus, we must remain humble. It is by the grace of God that we are saved. But the grafting also brings security, if we continue in faith, we will continue to receive God's kindness. We will continue to know his strong root holding us in the hurricanes and fires of life. We will continue to know his nourishment during life's dry seasons and when we feel so tired of life or faith that we couldn't go on alone. In these times, we can draw upon our graftedness and wait upon God.

The grafting also brings holiness. If the root is holy, so are the branches. Holiness isn't just something to strive for, like marathon running. Instead it is what we are when we are grafted into God. We are all Saints... even when we don't feel like it, and even if we don't act like it. We are a holy people serving a holy God. Our holiness isn't dependent on ourselves but on where our root is – who we are grafted into. I can address you as holy because God is holy. When we act in a right fashion, we aren't being good; we are being what our rootstock has made us. When we act contrary

to that, our actions offend us, because they aren't natural to our state of grafted holiness. This means life isn't a constant struggle to be good, but instead a constant acting out of the holiness that runs through our veins because of our connection to our Almighty and Holy Father.

This in-grafting into God therefore might be a challenge to some of us, a reassurance to others, a humbling or a new way of thinking, but it certainly isn't dull. Our in-grafting by faith in Jesus is the most exceptional bit of divine gardening there is going. And thankfully God is a much better gardener than I am!

Amen.