

A few lucky souls here present had a unique opportunity yesterday afternoon. We got to see the Abbey gardens, a place where almost no one goes these days. During the tour we saw what is known as a champion tree – the largest sycamore in Somerset, if not England. Our tour guide and former headmaster, Dom Leo, noted that when a storm damages the champion tree, the tree nevertheless seems to rally and to thrive once again. The less securely attached branches have been blown off over time, bringing warmth to Benedictine fireplaces – at least they burned well. The tree certainly looked magnificent yesterday, having weathered two centuries of storms. Nature naturally prunes itself.

What does the p-word, pruning, mean? It is nature's haircut. If you like gardens, respect gardeners. I love seeing our gardener, Chris, out and about, mowing, trimming, planting and pruning. Imagine our grounds without a gardener. God the Father is the gardener *par excellence* for the tree of Christ. Everyone here is either a branch or a potential branch. Two of you have requested baptism. That means you'll be a new branch of the tree, the tree of Christ, grafted on by baptism. It means the water of life flowing around the tree will reach your veins. The best advice I can give to a newly baptised Christian is inspired by Christ: *Make your home in me, as I make mine in you... a branch cannot bear fruit all by itself, but must remain part of the vine.* To be fruitful, we need Christ. Through Him, all things were made. Our fruitfulness comes from him too. At Confirmation, the fruits of His Spirit are bestowed for the newly Confirmed to cultivate. Those being confirmed on Friday, remember that you are called to bear lasting fruit for God.

We easily understand what Jesus means when he says that he is the Vine – and we are the branches. The tree of life is the Church, Christ is the head of the Church, and we are members of the body of Christ, branching out into the world. Running through the organism are the graces of the sacraments. Later, most of us will receive Holy Communion. When we eat and drink at the altar, the goodness is spread among us all; it is like how water circulates around a tree, or blood around a body. It keeps all parts of the tree (or body) fed with all that it needs to thrive and survive. However, if we receive Christ's body and blood with a hard heart, or without faith in what it means, or without profound gratitude, no good will come. We will not grow, nor bear fruit. Sometimes, a branch rots, or becomes overgrown, and something has to be done. The Father is the Divine Gardener, he prunes, cares for the tree of life. Jesus tells his disciples that God the Father is the vinedresser. He says: *Every branch in me that bears no fruit he cuts away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes to make it bear even more.*

Part of being a Christian is bearing fruit. Also, we have to allow ourselves to be pruned. Our repentance, willingness and openness to change, these signal that we are prepared for God to do this. We all want to be the best Christian we possibly can be. Therefore a little gardening will be necessary sometimes. This will help us to rediscover the source of our life, that is Jesus Christ. Remember Jesus said: *Whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty; for cut off from me you can do nothing.* He also said, with words that might well concern us: *Anyone who does not remain in me is like a branch that has been thrown away – he withers; these branches are collected and thrown on the fire, and they are burnt.* A slightly scary prospect to think what Jesus could mean, branches cut off and burnt? But the fruitful branches, they are not burned. They are merely pruned, so they bear more fruit.

Our school is pruned every year. Those who are ripe for university and life beyond school move on. They make space for the growth of new students. The old ones leave behind their example, their commitment to service, their passion for excellence. They have made their mark among those who remain. The summer turnaround is fruitful pruning. One pruned branch can lead to a forest of growth. We may produce more or less fruit than another; but any fruit is a sign of the divine life in us. If we are allowing Jesus, the champion tree, to reach us and feed us, we are alive in him, and he in us. Then the vinedresser will not cut us off nor burn us. The Father will send humbling challenges, by way of pruning, so that we may produce even more fruit.

What form of pruning do you need in life? Ask God the vinedresser for his help. He will not burn living branches, his true disciples. We are disciples if we live our Christian life to the full, humbly allowing God to shape us. Then we have little to worry about. Jesus says: *You are pruned already, by means of the word that I have spoken to you. Make your home in me, as I make mine in you.* We hope to make our home eternally with Christ, by remaining close to the Lord in this life, ever nourished by the vine. Ever pruned by the vine dresser.