

Oh, Doctor Beeching!

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Throughout his life, my father was a great railway enthusiast. His love for trains, and for steam trains in particular, began in his boyhood. Growing up in Bristol, many of his weekends were spent cycling in the surrounding countryside of Somerset and Gloucestershire, stopping at railway bridges and branch line stations to watch the trains go by. As an adult, he was a keen and highly skilled railway modeller. In pride of place in our dining room as I grew up was his layout that took an entire side of the room, a beautiful recreation of a stretch of his beloved Great Western Railway.

And although I never came to share that level of enthusiasm or skill, I was I am sure shaped by my father's passion. I soon understood that in my father's world there were heroes and villains. Chief among the heroes was the great engineer, Isambard Kingdom Brunel, whose achievements included not only the Clifton Suspension Bridge and the SS Great Britain but so much of the infrastructure of the Great Western Railway in its prime. And the chief villain? A civil servant by the name of Dr Richard Beeching.

I sense that some of you share the same visceral reaction to Beeching's name that my father had. His name will always be associated with the Beeching cuts that resulted from the 1963 report commissioned by Harold Wilson's government, with the brief of reviewing the future of the railway network. Of the 18,000 miles of track, connecting communities large and small

throughout the country, Beeching urged the closure of 6,000, a full third of the existing railway network.

Although I was brought up to see Dr Beeching as the villain of the piece, I do recognise that there is a counter-argument. Some have even seen him as the saviour of the railways, in facing up to the unsustainable proliferation of minor branch lines, costly to maintain and carrying little traffic. Dr Beeching himself later said, “I suppose I’ll always be looked upon as the axe man, but it was surgery, not mad chopping.” That’s one way of viewing the Beeching cuts; a trimming of the unprofitable branches for the good of the whole. My father, for one, was not convinced.

In today’s Gospel reading, we heard the words of Jesus, *“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit“*.

I am not an expert in transport economics, and neither am I an expert in gardening. I struggle with the concept of pruning. There is something counter-intuitive about cutting a plant back in order to promote growth. But I think I can just about get how it works. Pruning releases the plant to focus its energies and resources where they will do most good. But it’s a task that needs to be done with skill and care, if it is not to become just destructive hacking back. Careless or overzealous pruning can kill the plant you are trying to grow.

So perhaps it is my ambivalence about the Beeching cuts that makes me wary of this verse in John’s Gospel. Too often we have

heard the narrative of cutbacks being necessary to secure long-term sustainability and growth; and too often we have been let down. It was the line that was trotted out when the pit closure programme began. Concentrate on the most profitable and productive mines, and shut down the others; and we know, here more than anywhere, where that ended.

Too often the language of cutting back, of pruning, has impacted most severely on poorer and rural communities, as services are centralised on the towns and cities, leaving villages and outer estates deprived of post offices, buses, libraries, doctor's surgeries... you name it.

So when Jesus says in this Gospel, "He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit", I am wary. Taken on its own, and out of context, and it sounds like a threat, of the kind we hear all too often. "Be fruitful, be productive – or else. Turn a profit – or face the chop".

And spiritually, that can be deeply unsettling, at both an individual and a church level. It can lead to an insecurity and self-doubt. Am I producing sufficient fruit to retain my place in the vine? Or will God consider me a worthless branch, fit only for the bonfire?

We are facing a culture in which churches, and small churches especially, can feel the same insecurity. What happens if we don't grow in numbers, or if we can't pay our way? Are we for the chop as well?

But if we're hearing Jesus' words that way, then I think we're getting things the wrong way round. The branches do not remain in the vine because they are fruitful; they are fruitful because they remain in the vine. *"I am the vine and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing."*

Jesus does not command us to be fruitful, but to be faithful, as he himself is faithful to the Father and to us. It is the Father who is the vine-grower, not us, and it is from God and God alone that growth can come.

And sometimes that growth will come by way of pruning, a process that can be painful and unsettling. But we can have trust and confidence that the one who prunes does so with the utmost skill and care. This is not a hatchet job.

Our call is to be faithful, to remain in the vine. It is a call to stay rooted and connected, in the place where we are, to one another in our network of churches, and to God, from whom all our strength and our life and our growth derives. Be faithful and we will be fruitful. Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches; and that is not a warning, but a promise.

(Sermon preached at Baxterley Church on 29th April 2018)