

16th June 2023, Eucharist and Matins.

Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

Father Christopher – Official farewell service

I am a dreadful gardener. Just ask Mother Emma and Jeremy, as they have, from next door in the Vicarage, seen our little patch of paving and grass become more and more overgrown and full of weeds. From time to time I do spend an hour or two making a vain attempt on the weeds, but the prospect of me actually growing and nurturing anything is approximately zero. I have told them that we have contributed to St Mary Abbots becoming an eco-church by re-wilding, though Dawn and now Demetrios have mounted enormously kind and impressive campaigns to improve our little patch of earth.

Despite my poor track record however, were I to sow seeds, even I know that rather than scattering them randomly, on the path, on rocky ground, and among brambles, they need to be gently patted down in moist, nutritious soil, at least if you want success. And so, we might ask ourselves, in response to this morning's parable, is God such a dreadful gardener that he does not even know the basics? Well, firstly, the seed He scatters is that of the kingdom of God. He does not need to be careful with what He scatters, for it has no limit. And secondly, the ground in which this seed is scattered is us, and we are made in God's image, however unpromising that ground might sometimes seem. All metaphors have their limits, and perhaps the limit in this case is that contrary to types of ground, you cannot tell with human beings whether they are going to be fruitful or not.

It is chance that this is the reading for my leaving service, and in preparing to preach to you this morning the most obvious thing to say would be that we as priests are simply sowing seeds, not knowing which might bear fruit, and that only God giveth the growth. For we priests are the epitome of modesty and humility, as you must know by now. That wouldn't be a bad sermon to preach. *Except* that it would elide God sowing the seed with the priest sowing the seed. So perhaps not so modest after all.

More importantly however - despite my own poor gardening skills - in considering my too brief time with you, *nurturing* feels like a more appropriate analogy for the priest's work than sowing seeds. While here I have been happiest in three places I think: presiding at the altar in St Paul's Chapel; kneeling in prayer in the Resurrection Chapel; and sitting with people one-to-one in the pews at the edge of the church. The first two nurture me in my relationship with God, and enable me to do the third. And it is those encounters with people in conversation that are always the day's chief blessing. The greatest treasure of St Mary Abbots is in my view those who come in seeming lost or in pain, or simply searching, of whom there are many.

They – you - come in because we are open, and also because it is easy simply to find a corner to sit or kneel, and not be bothered. Simply to be, in this place, the stones of which have heard the prayers of so many who come seeking solace and home – a place which is as much theirs as anyone's, because it is God's. And of those who come here week in week out, in season and out of season, so many bring their deepest longings and fears in open and trusting conversation. Perhaps hoping for advice, more often simply wishing to be heard. And it is in those conversations that the gentle breath of the Holy Spirit is heard, sometimes, in the words of St Paul, with sighs too deep for words.

One of the things we are told to do in the ordination service is to watch for signs of God's new creation. Those signs are always present in these conversations. Though as with the parable, we can never see whether the seeds that are present will germinate. That is one of the exciting things about ministry. I don't simply mean whether someone will go away and think about Christianity and perhaps start coming to our services. That would be too shallow an understanding of what the kingdom of God is. I mean whether they – you again, to be more precise, or perhaps we – will begin to see how we might have life in all its fullness, as Jesus tells us He came for.

We do of course believe that living out the Christian faith as part of God's church is a core part of living life in all its fullness, but what we are about, and what the kingdom of God is, is far richer than we could possibly imagine. And the reason why Jesus has so many parables for the kingdom of God – just think of the mustard seed, the lost sheep or the prodigal son – is that while it is indeed the pearl of great price, we only know it when we see it blossoming in us in the unique way which God intends for us, made in His image, each of us unrepeatable and irreplaceable.

In nurturing the germination and growth of this seed, in walking alongside you in your faith, we priests cannot know whether that seed has taken root, whether it is growing quickly only to wither, or whether it will go on to flourish and bear great fruit, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty. And it right that we do not know.

Each of us is only here for a season, some longer than others, but most of us less than many of you. We are here to listen, to teach, to give hints, from our limited experience, about how to live a good life – how to do justly, how to love mercy, how to walk humbly with our God. What we are not here for is to ensure 'success', whatever that is in this deepest human sense. We could not, even if we thought it was our job. Whether the seed takes, whether it flourishes, is not up to us – it is up to you. But watching the kingdom of God take root in you, walking with you as together we all seek to conform our lives to Christ's, whether the steps are faltering and small or great bounding strides, is the most enormous joy and privilege.

I am sure that whoever follows me in the autumn will have the same privilege of listening to those signs of the kingdom, as the Holy Spirit continues to breathe through the conversations of this place; just as Mother Emma and Mother Alice do. But I would like to end with something else from the ordination service, which is for me one of the most powerful charges we are given as priests, but which is a challenge as valid for all of us Christians: Will you, in the strength of the Holy Spirit, continually stir up the gift of God that is within you?

The seed is sown. As I began with, God sows this seed indiscriminately, in a way which would horrify any careful gardener. The seed of the kingdom of God is sown in each and every one of you – that I say with absolute confidence. And the question of whether you will continually stir up that gift of God that is within you is really a question of whether you will respond to that gift with hope.

Will you, in the strength of the Holy Spirit, continually stir up the gift of God that is within you? Because I can promise you, that if you allow the seed of the kingdom of God to take root in you, to grow and to blossom, it will indeed bear much fruit, thirty, sixty, a hundred-fold, and you will have riches and deep joy beyond measure as indeed I have had in ministering here with you, and for that I give thanks, to you and to God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **Amen**