

Lent Compline Series 2017 Faith in and at Work

St Mary's Kidlington
Lent 1, Sunday 5th March
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This year our Sunday morning sermons will be given by people in various occupations talking about their jobs in relation to their faith. In this series of Lent Compline addresses I will follow the same idea but looking at the occupations of various people in the bible. I want in particular to link this with our current thoughts about Church growth – many of you will have heard of or been to the LYCIG meetings – Leading your church into growth.

Gardeners and Farmers

This evening – we'll start with the earliest human occupation mentioned in the bible – the gardener or farmer. In the first version of the Creation story in Genesis, "And God said Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit" and God said to man "I have given you every herb bearing seed ..." and man was simply told to name them. In the second version (in Ch 2) "And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden ... and there he put the man who he had formed to dress it and to keep it." – the first gardening manual!

Nowadays we think of both the garden and man arising by evolution out of God's original creation. The bible story of Adam and Eve perhaps represents a memory of the dramatic development of societies from a hunter/gatherer existence to a pastoral and more fixed life of cultivation and also tending flocks. (We'll come on to shepherds later in this series of talks).

Gardeners want their flowers and shrubs to grow; farmers whole aim is to work with nature to produce growth. All of us who are members of the church, whether we are gardeners or farmers or neither, have a responsibility to help the church to grow and to help bring more people to a knowledge of the Good News of Christ's message. Jesus speaking in Galilee about God to a largely pastoral community often focussed his parables on farmers: the sower who sowed his seed on different sorts of ground; the enormous growth of tiny mustard seed; the men being hired to work in the vineyard.

So, what can we learn from what gardeners and farmers do and what lessons does that provide for us in our church life. (Here I should come clean that at home I do very little in the garden apart from the occasional lawn mowing and heavy digging or pruning; Joyce is the planner and designer. I'm sure we can agree that there are certain requirements for successful gardens and farms.

Planning to decide what will be planted where. We as a church need to think out, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, where we can best use our efforts and who will be the best people for those tasks – for we all have our strengths and weaknesses.

Preparation of the soil is important for gardeners, and is equally important in evangelism and church growth. Preparing others to accept the Christian message may simply be by the way we talk to people we come across day by day, gradually letting them know how much we value our own church life and, after some preparation, inviting them to some sort of church function – not necessarily a service. Like the gardener, we must be content to work with God's time frame, not our own hurry. Some of that preparation may be what we could call "**heavy digging**" when we need God's strength if we are challenged about our faith or feel called to do something that we would naturally shy away from.

But one way or the other we do need to actually **plant the seeds**. We can do this by speaking directly about our faith. We may never know when or even if that seed has grown, and 'as in the parable of the mustard seed' what may seem to us to be a very tiny seed may turn out to produce a huge growth.

Once planted **careful tending of the** seeds is needed, whether or not we ourselves planted them. In church that may mean ensuring we talk to the person who seems to be new or alone, even when we have some important church business to do with a friend. In our daily busy lives it may mean careful listening to and tending to the needs of others.

Our church activities may even need **occasional pruning** – prayerfully reviewing what we are doing as a church and perhaps deciding to cut out certain things in order to let the rest of our mission flourish and grow.

In all this we need to remember that it is God's **time scale** that matters, not our own; some seeds lie **dormant** for many years before the conditions are right for them to flourish. And it is God's '**geography**' that matters – sometimes wonderful things can grow in what might at first sight be the most unpromising locations. We must recognise and celebrate those growths of faith in places very different from our own, and never be arrogant and think that we have the 'right' way of doing things.

But the growth that we need to work towards is not simply growth in the number of believers, but growth in our own life of faith. The start of Lent is traditionally the time when we are encouraged to examine ourselves so that we may grow in faith and, in so doing, may encourage others on that journey.

Finally, we must acknowledge that, however proud we feel of the results in our garden, or in the church, we didn't actually create any of it – we are just working with God's creation. There is a lovely story of the rather condescending priest leaning over the fence of a beautiful garden and saying to the man toiling away "That's beautiful – Isn't it wonderful what God can do with nature" at which the old man straightened up and said "Yes reverend, but you ought to have seen what it looked like when he had it all to His-self!". Always we must remember that we are just God's helpers in the work of the Spirit. But equally God has only our hands to do the physical work.

I think I am right that the last time the word 'gardener' is used in the New Testament is when, after the crucifixion, Mary Magdalene is weeping outside the empty tomb and thinks that the man who comes and stands by her is 'the gardener'.

In this evening's sense, she was absolutely right. God was the creator and Jesus, his son, came to show us how the Kingdom of God should be cultivated.