

Sunday 3rd February

Jeremiah 1:6-10

Acts 6:1-7

John 15:1-16

I've recently seen a number of adverts for artificial lawns. They look wonderful. Bright green, lush looking grass and not a sign of moss. No rogue dandelions or daisies or clover. Just green grass.

I'm sure having one would make our garden look a picture. And no need to cut the grass or maintain it in any way.

But why stop at the grass? What about artificial trees and bushes and flowers. Crafted and sculpted to look just as I would like them. Green leaves offering shade and privacy all the year round. Bright colours of the flowers every day of the year. No leaves to clear up in the autumn; no pruning to be done; a garden looking perfect in winter as well as summer.

But before you all start panicking and phoning the Diocese about the Widney Lane garden, I must say that I certainly don't intend to do this.

Looking out today the garden looks at first glance dead and lifeless. Leafless branches hang from the trees; bushes seem to be made of dead wood; a few hardy plants in the beds – but no flowers and very little going on. But look more carefully and there are signs of spring bulbs poking through; there are buds of new growth on the fruit bushes and the trees. And not just plant life, but the foliage and dead leaves from last year provide food for insects, and the insects provide food for birds. We did the RSPB garden watch for an hour last Saturday and spotted 10 different species.

And more than that, I know the garden will change through the year. I remember how dead the garden looked last winter when we moved in, but how come May it was ablaze with colour as plants produced flowers all over the garden - Roses, dahlias, foxgloves, lilies of the valley, Canterbury bells and more besides. And then later in the summer we were blessed with fruit in the bushes and trees that offered welcome shade from the heat.

The garden is alive, its growing, it's changing and it's wonderful.

Jesus talks in our gospel reading today about us – Christians, the church – being like branches in a vine. He says that he is the vine, and we as branches are part of him, gaining our life from him through the sap that runs through the vine. Our purpose is to produce fruit. And fruit can only be produced from

a branch that is healthy and growing. Growth is change and it's the evidence of life. A branch that doesn't grow has no life and can certainly produce no fruit.

And today we are thinking about the churches growing – Christ the King, St John's and St James. We are beginning a series of Sunday sermons across the Parish entitled Going for Growth. We are asking church members to take a look at themselves as individuals to think about their own lives. Are you growing in your faith? Has the way you understand God and express your belief changed over the years? In short, is there evidence of life and growth?

I hear stories of how Christ the King used to have 50, 70 or more people here each week; how there was in the past a thriving Sunday school both here and at St John's; how things used to be so different. And there is a temptation to live in the past. But life and growth mean that things will change and the future will be different, in some way, from the past. Although I've described what our garden looked like last summer, I know that it won't be the same this year. It will be different. Not necessarily better or worse, but different.

One of the problems the churches have now (and this is true for all three churches in the parish) is that the few that we have to put a larger proportion of each of our energies into keeping things going. And keeping things going is important. It's important that at St John's people clean and care for the building; it's important that here at Christ the King chairs are put out each Sunday; it's important at both churches that people prepare the communion table, put out the books, choose the hymns and play the organ or piano, bring the flowers and make the coffee.

But the danger is that if all our energy goes into keeping it going and making it look OK we might become like the artificial lawn. Looks good but it doesn't change, doesn't grow, and ultimately has no life.

So this series of sermons is about changing the focus from keeping the church going to getting the church growing.

The early church as described in the reading from Acts that we heard this morning faced similar issues. The leaders' energies were being used up in essential tasks of caring for the members – we might say in keeping the church going. They decided that they had to make time for growth and looking outwards as well (or getting the church growing), and appointed 7 people to do the caring while Peter and James and John and the other disciples put their energies into prayer and proclamation. Interestingly though, the next we hear about two of these seven (Stephen and Philip) they were both seen preaching the word as well!

Growth means growth in numbers – more of us here and at St John’s and at St James each Sunday morning and worshipping at other times – but it also means growing in ourselves. Ensuring that we are firmly rooted as part of the vine (as Jesus says) with his sap, his energy pulsing through us. And as such we will be in the position to produce fruit and therefore help the church to grow in numbers as well.

The leaflet you have today outlines what we will be doing and thinking about over the next few weeks and months. It shows that we will be thinking about how this is something for all of us – not just the clergy or readers or committee members. We are all part of this vine; we all have the potential to grow and produce fruit.

You will see that we will be thinking about the way we present ourselves to others. What do people think when they come to church for the first time? What is the welcome that we give them like? Will they want to come back? Perhaps we forget just how daunting it can be for someone who’s not used to church to come into somewhere like this! I often make the analogy with going into something like a betting shop – I have absolutely no idea what to do in a betting shop; what’s the protocol; how do I place a bet; and how do I collect my winnings? To me it feels like a distinctly uncomfortable experience.

We’ll think about what motivates us. Why we come to church if you like. Is it to worship God and hear his word, or is it primarily to meet friends. Both are important, but surely our encounter with God is the priority.

We’ll think about how we support each other in prayer and in practical ways; how we handle our doubts and fears; how we pray to God day by day and how we read the bible and learn from it and from other Christians. The leaflet actually gives some ideas as to words you could use for each day of the week to help you in your prayers.

We’ll think about how we can produce fruit that helps those around us. We have a lot of “presence” in the community. Through our work in the school, the “journeys” at Christmas and Easter, our contacts through baptisms, weddings and funerals, things like the coffee mornings, Tuesday café and Ploughmans lunch; our social activities like Tea at the Ritz and the Quingo evening and much more besides. But are we making the most of these contacts? Do we use them as an opportunity to help people who are not members of the church to grow in their own faith – however small that faith might be?

As we move into Lent at the start of March we will be setting up Lent groups to talk and think about these issues further. You can have your say at any time – my door and Peter’s door are always open – but perhaps these groups will

offer an easier way of saying how you feel about all this, and how you want the churches to grow and develop. If you haven't been to a Lent group before, can I urge you to give one a try this year.

I hope all this doesn't leave you feeling worried or concerned in anyway. I hope that you feel that you can play a vital part in this. We are not about changing the churches into something to be feared, we are about allowing them to grow and develop into what God wants them to be. So please come and talk to me if it does concern you.

The words from the start of the book of Jeremiah which were in our OT reading are a great encouragement to me when I feel daunted or inadequate at what I think God might be asking me to do. I turn to him and say – I can't do this. (Jeremiah said *I do not know how to speak – I am just a boy*). And God turns back to me and says Do not be afraid for I am with you – just as he said to Jeremiah.

And this is what Jesus emphasises in the vine analogy. It's God's strength that flows through us in the sap. We cannot bear fruit as a branch apart from being in the vine. We are not on our own.

So today we look forward. We look forward to growing in our understanding and knowledge of God, to deepening our trust in him and our commitment to him and to seeing him do things in and through our churches that we could not do on our own.

And we finish this morning by saying the prayer for growth – which you will find in that leaflet.

God of Mission

**Who alone brings growth to your Church,
Send your Holy Spirit to give
Vision to our planning,
Wisdom to our actions,
And power to our witness.
Help our church to grow in numbers,
In spiritual commitment to you,
And in service to our local community,
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.**