

Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> July

Matthew 13: 3 – 11, 18 -23

Well, we are gradually moving back to 'normal' whatever 'normal' will be going forward. I know a number of churches opened their doors for socially distanced worship last weekend and more will open as we go through the summer. I wonder what the last fifteen weeks have meant for you. Can you look back and see something you have achieved or a new good habit forming? There is a helpful framework currently being promoted by the Royal Society of Arts, to enable organisations to consider moving forward in a changing world. Asking four questions:

- 1) What have you stopped which probably will not be restarted?
- 2) What has been started just for their season and will stop?
- 3) What has been stopped to will be resumed?
- 4) What has been started new which will be taken into the future? They are a good set of questions also for all of us individually as we consider our own personal habits and the creation of new sustainable and life-giving patterns.

I am aware that life moves at such a pace, and so often it seems that we gallop through life, attending to the things which need attending to day by day, week by week, year by year, perhaps looking back every so often with fond memories, but not really considering the effect we have made on the world around us, or the people we have met. I hope the summer will give the opportunity for us to do some looking back and reflecting before we get into the autumn and on to the next thing.

Only on the rarest occasion do we get a glimpse of the true extent of the difference our words or actions have made and most of the time our planning involves trusting in that God will do the work. None of us in February even thought it possible that our church services could be broadcast across the internet with such affect or that the housebound disconnected from the local church for years, would be able to connect easily for a regular zoom coffee morning! Today's Gospel reading helps us in our thinking both looking back and going forward and is a challenge to us all to make a difference wherever we are, and whatever stage we are at.

Going even further back in my life to the year 1970 I remember sitting on the newly polished floor listening to the very first assembly in a brand new school. The Headmaster was telling us about the new badge for the school - an oak leaf designed because of the large oak tree that stood on the roundabout in front of the school. He spoke of the saying that went with the acorn, a saying that I haven't forgotten, that out of little acorns do large oak trees grow.

That is the mystery of God, and the miracle of his grace. But in order for that to happen he calls us to plant the seeds in the first place, using our God-given gifts.

Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

Jesus' teaching reminds us of the first truth - that usually most of the important things in life remain invisible and although they are invisible, they are often more powerful than the things we can see.

It is difficult for Jesus to describe the Kingdom of God. He can only use illustrations that the people of his day could relate to. So, in our reading he speaks about seeds and sowing, about sprouting and growing.

It is interesting thinking about the major events in the Bible, that often the most significant seem to be invisible ones. Think about it – God’s appearances in the Old Testament calling key people to follow him – not seen, but heard and experienced – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Moses and David. Then the incarnation – God choosing Mary to bear his Son. Suddenly Mary was pregnant – something invisible had happened. Then there was Pentecost, another illustration of what Jesus is demonstrating. The unseen Spirit of God that gives life. The Hebrew word for Spirit is Ruah which means wind or breath – two further things that we cannot see, but we can see their effect.

So often the essentials of life are invisible. Without air we cannot live. So, it is also with love – love cannot be touched, there again neither can mercy or self-respect, but whilst they cannot be seen they have an impact.

One of the most important and most invisible things in life is faith and trust. Without trust a person cannot function, a person cannot become close to another, a person cannot escape fear and the most important things we can do is to trust God. Trust God that he will be our refuge and strength in times of trouble, trust God that he will be present with us and help us accomplish all that he asks of us and trust God that he will give us the power we need, the people we need, the joy we need. Trust in the promises of God. Trust is spoken of by Jesus. You plant a seed and it grows – whether we are awake or asleep, it puts forth first a shoot, then a head, then the full kernel in the head. By some means or other – life comes out of the seed that is planted.

So often in church life before Covid19 nothing much seemed to be happening – huge numbers of people were not pouring through our doors. Only a few people attended a parish quiet day if one was held. Most children didn’t come to church on a Sunday morning – however, as in the reading, small things remind us that God is doing his work unseen. What the last few months have revealed is that the stranger can come along to join in our worship, or families are willing to contribute to the messy church video if we ask them and people will give their time, skills and talents freely in many many ways if required. The last few months should increase our faith as there are many visible reminders of an invisible God both inside and outside the church and therefore going forward, we need to trust that God is at work.

The second truth is that the most successful lives and the greatest accomplishments and the kingdom of God itself are based on, and arise out of, the smallest and least significant things.

Jesus in the gospels speaks of a mustard seed, which grows into a great bush so great that the birds can shelter in it but it is so small at first. The kingdom of God works, God works with the little things. In today’s world we are geared up to focus on all that is big, and grand and flashy – big cars, big houses, big buildings, and if you go to John Lewis...big televisions and powerful speakers. We humans are impressed by big money, big fame and big status. Yet God chooses what is small and little to work with – from Jesus – a carpenter born to a young peasant girl, to the 12 disciples, to you and me.

The Bible says repeatedly that God loves the little ones, the humble ones, the people that others despise and reject. In fact the Bible says time and time again that the little things are the most important things – the deeds we do quietly, rather than all the things we boast about; the giving of the widow’s mite, rather than the huge gesture; the busiest people giving their spare half-an-hour to God rather than people with lots of time giving it

grudgingly. Indeed, the Bible says that in the end the little things will overturn the big things, they will bring down kings and show the emptiness of wealth and power.

This should be very encouraging for me and all of us – the signs of God’s kingdom are not necessarily big churches, big congregations, or gold and silver and fantastic wealth – but a few committed believers with ordinary, sometimes wavering faith, taking time to gather together even on a dodgy internet connection or telephone to pray and worship. Sometimes gathering around bread and wine – stuff that can be found at the supermarket and in most people’s cupboards – ordinary stuff for ordinary people.

The last few months can remind us that even the smallest thing is beautiful and lasting and fruitful. Yes, God’s work is done by some well-known names, but most often it is done – and done well, by local people, by committed people, by you and whenever you give a homeless person a few pounds, or help a person who is having trouble getting out, or donating to the food bank, or volunteering a few hours to help clean the church, or help pick up litter or visit a lonely neighbour. All these little things – all these acts of care – are God’s work. Out of them grows the Kingdom of God. Without them there is nothing.

The third truth is that living faith means focussing on good – not evil, believing God and not evil. I am sure we all remember the story of Chicken Little – it was one of the first stories I read as a child. He thought the sky was going to fall in, and ran around warning everybody, he fretted and fumed and worried. Many people are like Chicken Little. These people rob themselves by focussing on what is bad and the more they look at it the bigger it gets. Other people are perhaps like the centipede in an old tale about a centipede and a fly. The fly says to the centipede “ I have six legs and I know how to walk. You have 100 legs; how can you walk?” The centipede starts to think about it, and he thinks and thinks and he becomes paralysed and cannot move an inch.

We looked at the whole issue of fear last week and looking back over the last three months it would be easy to list all the negatives, the way that churches had to close, or the number of deaths or the incompetence of some of the decision makers. It would be easy to focus on the fears going forward and to become paralysed by them. I am sure in February we could have come up with many reasons why we could not do church online, or create a simple video or keep in touch with people just by phone. Even now we could just focus on the problems – the logistics of getting people back to church, the bother of all the work involved in getting our buildings clean, the fear that people won’t come, or if they came to the back once they might never come again.

Jesus is saying that if we focus on God and on his goodness, rather than on all that is not right around us, then we will radiate goodness, we will bring light to others as well as discover light ourselves. We will sow good seeds.

It has been a joy to look at my garden over the last three months. Everywhere around, if we care to look, we can see simple and ordinary miracles – the trees in our gardens, its remarkable how trees grow. Wheat too is remarkable stuff. You put a seed in the ground in May – and with the right conditions by September (or before the beginning of August in Dorset) hopefully you have a plant that is over three feet high which contains literally thousands of kernels of corn. So, if God can do these things, why cannot he do miracles with us? Growth is a remarkable thing – it is virtually beyond our imagining –if we think of the good things – not the bad – it will be for us God’s seed growing in our hearts.

And the fourth and final truth is that God is the author of good things. It is not us but God who tends the seed and provides for its growth into the kingdom of God. We may want to

try and try and try, we may have hundreds of opinions about how things ought to be done, but we are called only to allow ourselves to be God's agent – to open ourselves to him and his word, to read it, think about it and act upon it. Working together with those who also want to be God's agents is the place where his kingdom grows.

That is also why for me, praying the diocesan renewing hope prayer, during these months has been important. For it is God who does the renewing and the growing.

I hope by looking back our faith will be increased. The last few months may have just been a small blip in a whole long history of the Christian church and our local churches, it may have been a small acorn, but only God knows all the seeds that have sprung up from it as he gives the growth. Let's take all that has been good into the next stage of our life together and with renewed hope and prayer continue to faithfully and abundantly do the work of the kingdom.