

A Reflection from Revd Ali for the 2nd Sunday after Trinity

In our Gospel reading, Jesus was teaching his followers using parables - Stories that would have chimed with the peoples' agrarian background. A person sows some seeds, and time passes; the seeds grow, and produce grain, without the need for this person to do anything; in time, the grain is ripe and the person harvests it. The grain might feed this person's family, or it might be sold for income to support them. A proportion of it would be left at the edges of the field so that poor people could share in the harvest or some of it might be given as an offering at the temple. The growth is not caused by human efforts, but by God. God allows the seed to do the thing that only that seed can. God has provided all the information that the seed needs to grow into what God intends it to be. It is all contained in that, sometimes tiny, dry-looking husk. God gives the growth, and that growth is useful, productive and valuable.

Then Jesus describes the kingdom of heaven as like a mustard seed. Not the mustard seeds that we are familiar with, that grow into a lovely sandwich filling in a couple of days. But a tiny seed, which like the previous metaphor, grows exponentially and develops into a mighty shrub. All that potential for growth in the tiniest of seeds. It might have an impressive growth rate - those type of mustard seeds grow into a sprawling shrub, something like a 2-metre high bramble patch. Brilliant for providing homes for birds, doing the thing that only it can do, but not necessarily the most elegant of plants.

So what do all these images of growth mean to us here in 21st Century Corley and Fillongley? Well, each in their own way, points to a kind of growth that is exponential, outrageous and a real gift from God. Sometimes that kind of growth can make us feel uncomfortable even a little bit scared. Often, we prefer our growth to be controlled, manageable and predictable. I sometimes think that it is a bit like those platform video games, if you are into that kind of thing – you need to perform at one level before you make the next incremental step to the next. Many of our professions encourage that way of thinking with common pay spines and incremental progression is the norm. None of that is bad, but it does tend to make us think that everything we do should have a measurable outcome. That our progress should be steady and incremental and if it isn't then we should probably stop doing it and use our time in a different way instead. That kind of thinking is encouraged by our target driven culture. The world that concentrates on progression into the next job, the next house, the next car, the increase in GDP of our country.

There has been, thank God, some divergence in the Church of England from measuring growth in the churches by the number of 'bums on pews'. For a long time a successful church was one with that measurable outcome - the number of people attending. But that measure tells us nothing of what God is doing outside of our churches on a Sunday morning. It tells us nothing of peoples' personal discipleship and relationship with God. In our Diocese, we have used the NCDs 8 Essential Qualities of Healthy Growing Churches as a measure of our growth. A holistic way of looking at what we do, and how it affects us here in church, but also what impact we are having out there in the community. Obviously, this last 15 months has had a huge impact on our 'ministerial statistics', the number of services, the number in the congregations. But the work that God has put onto our church community's hearts during the pandemic has been exponential. People have been fed, visited, shopped for, prayed for and supported in a myriad of quiet, unassuming ways. That is the growth that God has given during this difficult time. Immeasurable in worldly terms but the impact on individual lives has been enormous.

Jesus reminded us in our reading that, in God's kingdom, once we have sown a seed it grows night and day without any obvious input from us. The growth is down to God. It might be a useful crop or even a sprawling, ungainly bramble patch, growing like a weed. God puts the potential in the seed to do that thing that only it can do. But God does need gardeners here on earth to help with that propagation. And that is where we come in. There are potential harvests, that at the moment, are just dry seeds or like tiny mustard seeds waiting for the right conditions to burst into

those crazy brambly bushes. We all need to take our cue from the ultimate gardener, planting, encouraging and watering those seeds.

So how can we do that? How can we follow our call to be God's assistant gardeners? Well, we might want to encourage others to join us here in church, to pray together, worship God together and to enjoy each other's fellowship. Hopefully, soon we will be able to offer hospitality without regulations and rebuild relationships that have been impacted by the pandemic. But in the meantime we can share our stories of the difference having a relationship with God has on our lives. Or we can be the one that notices injustice and raises their voice to challenge the status quo. Maybe by gently challenging someone's prejudice or aggression. By an act of love towards a neighbour or a stranger. By sharing our money, our time, our homes, with someone who needs it. By being a presence of hope and love in a difficult situation. By praying always, and as St Francis says, using words if necessary.

We gather and pray here every Sunday 'Your kingdom come' but we can't really measure or control its growth. We just have to trust that, even if all we see is a tangled bramble patch instead of neat rows of grain, or a beautiful tree, we mustn't be disheartened. We mustn't stop working alongside the gardener, sowing tiny seeds, planting cuttings in the ground, and sticking round to see what God will do with them. We may be blessed by seeing fruit or we may see what looks like tangled weeds grow up, or we may see nothing. But that's not the point. We are not called to make things grow, that is up to God. We are called to simply to sow seeds or plant those cuttings and work alongside our Creator God and let God do the rest.

Amen