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Christ Church West Wimbledon  
Sermon : 5th Sunday after Trinity ~ July 16, 2017

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Like many parish priests, I've always had largish gardens at the vicarages where I have lived and have always tried my best to keep them looking neat and tidy – not having, as some assume, a gardener! In my previous parish a brand new vicarage was built and the diocese gave me some money to spend on plants and shrubs and trees – but with definite guidelines as to what was suitable for planting and sowing. Nothing I planted then was to cause problems to my successors in the future. It was made clear that my garden was 'on loan' to me for as long as I remained the Vicar. When I left, I knew that someone else would take care of it and the results of what I planted and sowed wouldn't be seen by me but would be enjoyed by others. I did much of the work of sowing but I wouldn't see the results.

A parish is a community of God's people which is also 'loaned' to us as stewards. We have a clear task to care for all within the parish but not necessarily with seeing the end results. Our work and ministry as Christians is to sow seeds carefully and prayerfully and faithfully, but recognising the reality that they may not see the light of day for many years to come – or even perhaps not at all.

But crucially, as any gardener knows, the successful sowing of seeds depends also on the good conditions of soil and sun and rain. In our Gospel reading for today, the well-known parable of the sower was an obvious image for the people whose main source of income would have been through agriculture in all its varied forms.

In Matthew's account, we read that the crowd is so large that Jesus has to get into a boat while the people cram along the shore of the lake, craning to see him and hear what he is teaching. But they might have been somewhat puzzled by his illustration. We need to realise that it is only the disciples who are given some further explanation about the meaning of this parable a few verses on. But amongst the crowd, the farmers would know that you have to be careful where you sow. You don't scatter amongst rocky soil or into thorn bushes and so on. But hopefully there were those in the crowd who had ears did hear and understand the subtlety of what he was getting at. For in such a large throng of people, it was to be inevitable that some will not have heard his words at all. Some will have misheard them – like that wonderful scene in Monty Python's *Life of Brian* when someone at the back mishears Jesus saying 'Blessed are the peacemakers' as 'Blessed are the cheesemakers' and wonders what's so special about cheesemakers.

Then again some will have heard the words but won't be bothered to take it all in. Some will have heard and initially been receptive, but then other matters jostle for space in their lives, and they drift away. But then others will have heard properly and, through God's grace, been encouraged to spread the Good News to others.

Of course we know much gardening is trial and error. More than once, I've had to move something which was just not in the right place. One plant will do well there, whereas another will not. Christian ministry in the parish is not dissimilar. Some ideas will work well and others won't work at all. Which is why, as a Church, we have to rely on God's grace and guidance to help us to sow in the right ways and right places – and leave the harvesting up to him.

So – our work with children and young people and newcomers and enquirers. Our ministry with those seeking baptism, marriage or funeral. Ministry with schools. Seeds sowed? Well, it's all in God's hands...and that is important to remember – we have God on our side.

Story of a year 6 boy at Hollymount School: "We have God on our side"

Seeds sown – but with results which probably won't be seen by those who are doing the sowing. So never think any brief encounter and conversation had, any small act of kindness shown, is wasted. We will often never know what the outcome will be – it is patiently to be left in God's hands. For we have God on our side.

Patience is something that is often in short supply in our world, but is a crucial characteristic for the Christian Faith. It takes time and patience for a person to grow in their faith. It takes time for the seed sown, maybe in childhood, to grow to full maturity. In my last garden, there was a eucalyptus shrub which wasn't doing well. There was lots of advice: "It's dead; I think you should give up on it" and so on. Then someone peered more closely and said, "No, look, there are tiny buds coming through the bark – it is alive" – and they were right. "Be patient and give it at least another year" – and I did – and when I left it had grown into a beautiful and tall 20 foot tree.

The kingdom of God may start small but it can grow to something that becomes unmissable and unmistakable. Whether it is a small seed needed to grow a large tree or a tiny amount of yeast vital to make bread rise or a tiny pearl of great worth and so on – the kingdom of heaven, we are told, is something of great worth for which nothing else matters.

So the seeds we sow as we go about our community are crucially important. Often we never know the result of something good we may say to someone or something generous

we may do for them or something we may plant in their lives. We may never find out what effect that may have had on their lives. Conversely, of course, if we sow dissent or harm around, we may not also know the results – until perhaps it is too late and the damage we have done cannot be repaired.

We all know that there are things we grow in the garden that need some tender loving care and other things that can be left to flourish on their own. People are no different – many need tender, careful, patient care – something that each one of us has the capacity to give to another. We don't have to do it in a brash and noisy way – just quietly, patiently and unobtrusively will often be just as effective, if not more so – deeds done rather than words spoken.

I leave you with two phrases. The 6<sup>th</sup> century Welsh Bishop, St David, told his followers “to do the little things”. Then seven centuries later when St Francis sent his brothers out to preach the good news of Jesus, he told them ‘Use words if you must’.

“Do the little things” and “preach the good news of Jesus using words if you must.” Hold these two phrases in your mind as you go out into the fields of this community, as it were, to live and work amongst the people around us, doing it all in order to live and work to God's praise and glory, in the words of that familiar prayer we often use.

For each of us has the capacity to patiently sow seeds that help to cultivate others for the Kingdom of Heaven – we just have to pray for the courage and the opportunities to do it.