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Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon : 17th Sunday after Trinity ~ October 8, 2017

I wonder whether you have ever seen the BBC2 drama called 'Marvellous'? It is the true story of an ordinary man born with learning difficulties called Neil Baldwin. As one reviewer put it: 'Prejudice tells us that Baldwin should be unemployed, friendless and sad; his triumph is to be none of these'. Neil himself explains that 'he always wanted to be happy and decided to be so' – 'he always wanted to be happy and decided to be so'. The drama simply told his story – and was interspersed with footage of Baldwin himself, talking to the actor who played him. For decades, he has looked after the kit for Stoke City, has been unofficial greeter to students at Keele University – for which he was honoured with an honorary degree – and seems to pop up everywhere, including being on the umpires boat at the Boat Race every year. He has an uncanny knack of getting to know many famous people, such as royalty and MP's, who quickly become his friend. It was a real feel-good true story.

Watching 'Marvellous' again the other day made me think about our life, about the life of our Church. What are we here for? What is the Church here for? There will be lots of answers to such pondering. Some of us might even go so far as to say simply that we want to be happy and decided to be so!

Today, we continue our harvest theme as we reflect on one of the most familiar pictures of God – God as a gardener, planting vines in a vineyard – digging the ground, planting with care, weeding and watering regularly, supporting the branches and pruning – in other words, really caring for this vine so that it will bear a marvellous crop of grapes. It's a pictures that many of us can relate to. Gardeners are always proud of what they grow and they'll go to any lengths to protect their plants from slugs and greenfly. It doesn't take a great leap to imagine God caring even more so for his people, and wanting to protect them from harm, from evil and sin.

The question we have to ask is 'what kind of fruit does God the gardener find in us, in his Church, in our community? Does what he finds in us, in this Church, in this community, joy and happiness and peace – or does he instead find sour fruit? I've a lovely poster, at the moment still packed away somewhere, which reads 'God wants spiritual fruits, not religious nuts'.

That poster gives us a good clue that what delights God is when he finds those spiritual fruitful qualities amongst us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control. There is also little doubt that God longs to see justice, mercy, right living, purity and honesty.

So if God suddenly came here this morning and carried out the religious equivalent of an OFSTED inspection, what would he find? Would he find a group of people who are happy and thankful for their lives? Would he find a group of people who are joyful and confident in their faith, always ready to welcome others? Would he find a group of people who are always ready to support others not only by prayer but in more practical ways? What would he find? Would God find here a group of people who have taken on board his Son's teaching as it is found in the New Testament – and not least from this morning's passage from Matthew's Gospel?

In Matthew's story, the owner doesn't come in person, but sends his servants, who encounter hostility and rejection. The commentators suggest that the servants here must be God's prophets. So when the story moves on to tell of the owner sending his own son, and the vineyard managers plotting his death, this clearly points to Jesus himself. Yet note just how smug the Pharisees are. Yes, they can see what a terrible thing it would be to treat God like that, but, no, it can't have anything to do with them, for they are the true upholders of the faith, are they not?

It is a warning for all of us. We cannot assume that just because we may have been born into a church-going family, have been to Church for years, are on the PCC, that we are immune from the need of making a personal pledge to follow Jesus Christ each and every day of our lives. As Paul puts it in Philippians, he would happily throw everything else away, since finding new life, freedom and joy in Jesus Christ. It is why we are encouraged to think about what our faith means to us and maybe to make a commitment for ourselves through confirmation. It is why we are encouraged to think about what God may be calling us to be and to do. Our new Reader, Flis Banks, has responded to the call of God to train and offer herself to be a Licensed Lay Minister, to become a Reader as they call it. There are other opportunities for service in the Church – for instance, we are actively looking to elect two new Churchwardens next spring to assist me in the leadership of the church. Could that be you?

So in all this, my hope and prayer is that this garden of ours may grow a bumper crop of good fruits that will please God and bring real happiness, blessing and healing to our community. And maybe each of us can, like Neil Baldwin in that drama 'Marvellous', at the very least, just aim to be happy and decide to be so?