

This is the gospel of the Lord

Transforming lives through following Christ in love and service: by....Growing. 9 December 2012

Philippians 1:3-11 and Luke 3:1-6

Both Caroline and Mark have recommended that this series of sermons should be read together; as the unpacking of Knowing, Growing and Going will overlap and intertwine. The growing strand invites all sorts of gardening metaphors but those of you who heard an earlier sermon of mine on the vision – following Christ – will know that I'm not much of a gardener – while I have aspirations, I have little skill and not much commitment to the art or the hard work. But then, maybe, the internal growth of a person in faith and commitment when the Holy Spirit is the gardener is somehow different.

Last week Caroline reflected that our Christian lives as individuals and as a church should be rooted in prayer and in worship. Mark has challenged us to trust, risk and yield to God. Today we are looking at growing in faith, commitment and trust as followers of Christ. I'm going to suggest that this is something we cannot do on our own. It has to happen in community. In the same way as pollination of plants depends on the proximity of other plants, of the work of insects and the movement of the wind so we depend on the proximity of other people to support us as we grow in faith. Yes, there is plenty we will do as individuals but without the encouragement of others, the experience and example of others and sometimes, frankly, the irritation of others, we will be lopsided.

First of all, though, I suggest we need to ask ourselves, 'do I want to grow?' Or is it just enough to stick ourselves in the soil of Christianity and then to expect an annual cycle of buds, shoots, leaves and flowers? Because I think all of us expect that there will be some sort of fruit from each of our lives. Can that happen without a desire to grow? Maybe another way of asking that question is am I whole hearted about being a Christian?

For I think that God wants us to want to grow and in much the same way as plants need to be tended, mulched and pruned in order to produce the best fruit or to flower abundantly then we need to look at how we tend our lives.

God has made us. He has given us a body, a mind and a spirit. These three overlap and intertwine. We need to learn to care for each of them. To give ourselves the right balance of work, rest and play. For each of us that will be different. At different points of our lives, our responsibilities and commitments will shape how much time and attention we can give to each. And as we make sure that we are properly fed with nutritious food, so we should pay attention to our spiritual and mental nutrition. That our diet of entertainment, what we read, watch and talk about, is wholesome too. That we supplement that by seeking out people who will build us up, not undermine us.

But it's not just about being good is it? It's not just about avoiding the naughty but nice things of the world?

Tending our lives is all about discipleship. Following Jesus. Being disciples of Jesus. Basing every part of our lives on the model that God gave us. Learning to embrace even those areas where commitment is costly and not just appealing. I am constantly being surprised by Jesus. Just when I think I've got something pinned down and sorted I read a familiar passage in the Bible and realise that I have to reconsider what I thought I knew. So for any of us, whether we are old hands or coming into contact with Jesus' teaching for the first time, have plenty to learn and re-learn. And through that process we grow.

What are the tools that God has given us?

We have the model of Jesus. We can read about him, principally in the Bible. Establishing a habit and pattern of Biblical reflection and application is one way of embedding principles. It's not just about book learning. As Caroline said last week, good though that is, it also needs experience and encounter. Sharing what we have learned with one another, listening to one another without having to have the last word and letting someone else's experiences filter through our own all help us to understand how Jesus works in us and in others. This is something that can happen in housegroups, but it also something that we can develop in our more casual chats with each other and in the formal settings of a PCC meeting. Imagine speaking to one another in way that there is no domination, no contempt, just communion. Which isn't to say that we will all say the same thing!

Our gospel this morning starts the story of Jesus' ministry with the words of John the Baptist quoting from Isaiah. They tell of removing all the things that are a hindrance between ourselves and God. Our walk towards God has hindrances – valleys, hills, winding roads. Jesus came to remove those. I spent 3 years working in the fenlands of East Anglia. Having been brought up in the west and being a hill walker I found the flatness unrelenting and nothing on which to rest my eye. But those who had always lived there spoke of the beauty of the sky and that when they spent time in hilly areas they found that their vision was impeded. We all have different things that hinder our walk with God, things that stunt our growth, that impede our sight. Together, if we are honest with ourselves, if we wholeheartedly commit to supporting each other through our individual and collective journeys, we can be transformed. Mark told a story based on Indiana Jones – I came across it again when preparing this sermon – in 'If you want to walk on water you've got to get out of the boat', by John Ortberg. There he talks about expanding your spiritual comfort zone – step by step. It's not great leaps – just small steps.

Paul's opening words in the letter to the church in Philippi are full of joy. He says that his prayer for them is that their love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help them determine what is best. Paul Langham's translation puts it like this: 'That your love will never stop growing and that your spiritual understanding will increase until you know instinctively how to live God's way until Jesus comes back. Now that you have been put right with God through Jesus, I pray that your lives will be like a good tree which bears abundant delicious fruit. And I pray that God will get all the credit he deserves for what he's doing in you'.

The gospel message is life changing – it isn't a flash in the pan. It's interesting that 'love' is described by reference to 'knowledge and wisdom' – it involves both heart and head; not just the heart.

Out of our wholeheartedness comes a desire to serve. That takes many forms. In many cases it will be sacrificial. We have many examples of sacrificial service in St Peter's, but we also have to open to the possibility that we might need to receive from others too. That it's a two way street. That can make us far more vulnerable than being the one who is serving. Often too our service is done in ways that suit us; we are not ready to listen and hear what is actually needed. My prayer is that we open up to one another – there is risk involved in that – but the Holy Spirit can prise open the hardest of shells – though far more gently than we might imagine. May we all want for each of us to experience God's love; through our own openness to grow and through the way we each learn to serve one another. May we practice the small daily steps to expand our spiritual comfort zones. May we learn to recognise our own personal hindrances to growth and when we need rest, to lie fallow for a while, may we be open to God's healing touch so that we may be revived and continue the process of growth.

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