

## Growing Church

St. Brandon's

John 15: 1-12

24<sup>th</sup> March 2019

Here's a quiz to begin with (answers during the sermon):

- 1) On a scale of 1-10, where 1 is very poor and 10 is outstanding, the quality of the Durham Diocesan website in relation to its priority of 'Growing Church' is:  
a) 1; b) 3; c) 8.
- 2) In the period 1980-2015, how many new churches were established in the North East?  
a) 7; b) 63; c) 125.
- 3) Old blackcurrant bushes should be:  
a) Pruned very gently; b) pruned very hard; c) dug up and burnt.

If you've been here over the last couple of weeks, you'll know that during Lent we are following the Durham Diocese Waymark course, using the suggested readings, with sermons based around the course, and the opportunity to follow up after the service in a kind of Lent Group. The Waymark course itself is structured around the three Diocesan priorities which are ... Children and Young People; Growing Church; and Responding to Poverty. So two weeks ago, when Mike was preaching, was an introduction to the course as a whole; last week, when Alison was preaching, the session was focused on Children and Young People; and today it's Growing Church. Next week would be focused on poverty, but of course it's Mothering Sunday so we're missing that one in the service itself (though the Group will still run after the service). Having said that, we marked Church Action on Poverty Sunday only three weeks ago, so have at least looked at poverty recently (and the sermon is on the website if you missed it). Sunday April 7<sup>th</sup> wraps up the whole course and includes lunch.

So, Growing Church. Given that it's been a Diocesan priority for the last five years since Bishop Paul arrived, we might think that we would have heard a lot about it. And, to be fair, we have heard something and there have been various initiatives to promote this. Partnership for Missional Church (PMC) is one such, where churches are taken through a structured three year programme – 10 churches across the Diocese have just completed it, and 14 have just started the second three year programme. Alison Moore has been involved in supporting that. Then there is a Missional Leadership for Growth initiative which has trained just about all clergy in the Diocese. And as another example, Liam, together with Lois who some will know from Messy Church, have been doing a Growing Young Leaders' course put on by the Diocese. Knowing about these, I went onto the Diocesan website to get a fuller picture, and was surprised to find ... very little that's easily accessible! So my score for the website is a slightly generous 3 out of 10 in that there is *something* there, but not nearly as much as you might expect, particularly five years on. That doesn't, of course, mean that nothing is happening – there is, as we've already seen, and there is probably a lot more than I happen to know about and what the website tells us.

One pretty obvious distinction that the Diocese does make in relation to its priority of Growing Church is between spiritual growth and numeric growth. In other words, growth is both about those of us who are already Christians growing in our faith; and about inviting and drawing others into that faith so that our churches grow in numbers. My impression is that there is more emphasis on the former than the latter, and indeed that probably reflects the fact that we're better at and find it easier to grow organically – growing spiritually ourselves and perhaps encouraging our children to join in. And we're perhaps not so good at and find it less easy to invite and draw others into the faith.

That said, there were, according to a report produced by the Centre for Church Growth at Cranmer Hall in Durham,<sup>1</sup> 125 (not 7 or 63) new churches in the North East between 1980 and 2015, with typically 12,000 attending on Sundays, 2,500 of whom were under 16. 47 of those 125 churches had a majority of black and minority ethnic members, but only 18 had been founded by the main historic denominations. In Durham there were 16 new churches in that period including (have you heard of these?) the Chinese Methodist Church and the Durham Korean Church. And I know, since 2015 of at least one new church, a plant from Christchurch on Claypath in Durham (whose website is excellent!), called Grace Church which meets in Newton Hall – our eldest son and his family go there and it's a thriving, young, independent church.

So, we shouldn't simply assume that churches are dying, that it's terribly difficult to do anything about it in the dominant secular culture of our age, that there isn't a spiritual hunger out there, and that it's all rather depressing. And I want to come back to look at numeric growth in relation to us at the end.

But before that let's have a look at our gospel reading, and see how that can help us as we think about growing church. The true vine passage is, of course, one of Jesus' 'I am' sayings, and Jesus is picking up one of the well-known OT images for Israel – God brought a vine out of Egypt and planted it in the promised land (Psalm 80:8-18). Jesus takes that image and applies it rather differently to Himself – He is the vine, and if so then we are the branches whose spiritual life is, of course, dependent on remaining attached to Him. Detach ourselves and we will literally wither and die spiritually. If we remain attached then we will, really without much effort on our part, bear fruit because that is how vines and branches work.

Now vines, of course, produce grapes, and grapes, of course, can be used to make wine. And I think we're also expected to make a connection here with another passage, also unique to John's Gospel as this one is, about the wedding in Cana of Galilee (John 2:1-11). There, as you'll probably recall, Jesus turned water into wine, and it was top quality wine in embarrassing abundance. So too we, fed with the water of life via the true vine who is Christ, will, if we remain in Christ, produce top quality fruit in abundance. And, as the passage we're looking at goes on to say, most obvious and most important among the fruit we will produce is love, love for God and love for each other.

I want to also come back to this bearing of fruit at the end, but there is one other aspect of the vine image which we need to touch on, and that is, of course, pruning. And there are two sides to this. First, there is a warning – that if we are bearing no fruit, the gardener, God the Father, will cut us off. So not only can we decide not to remain in Christ and, as it were, cut ourselves off, but God might, in the end, decide we're not really up to much, not really serious about our faith, and cut us off. And if you're worried about that it almost certainly means it doesn't apply to you. Second, that if we do remain in Christ we should expect to be pruned. And the pruning is, of course, good for us in that it allows us to become even more fruitful. Which, of course, brings me to my third question – old blackcurrant bushes should, at least according to Monty Don (which is, of course, gospel in the gardening world), be pruned back hard. Now I tried this with an old and rather gnarled blackcurrant bush of mine late last autumn, after watching the Gardeners' World programme where Monty Don said this, and he's right! You should see it now with new shoots all over the place. But this then might be a rather uncomfortable parable for those of us who are rather old and gnarled ourselves – we might prefer a bit of rather gentle pruning; we might not get what we want.

And growth sometimes means the opposite of what we might think. I was rather bad at Biology at school and gave it up as soon as I could. So far as I recall, I only once got an A for a bit of homework, which was when we doing the life cycle of frogs. And I pointed out that as a tadpole is transformed into a frog, its tail shrinks, and that this is part of its growth. Not bad, eh? So growth to enable us to become our true selves,

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<sup>1</sup> Goodhew, D. & Barward-Symmons, R. (2015), New Churches in the North East, <http://community.dur.ac.uk/churchgrowth.research/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/NCNEreportFINAL.pdf>

the person under God who we are meant to be, will mean pruning and cutting back, and might perhaps mean losing some part of ourselves that is actually an encumbrance.

Now you'll probably have realised already how all of this can be applied very easily in this Lenten season. So it might be helpful during this Lent to reflect on whether we are consciously and deliberately remaining attached to the vine, remaining in Christ, and what we do by way of spiritual disciplines of worship and prayer and so on to continue in that. And it might be helpful to reflect on what the fruit is that we produce as a result of remaining in Christ, in effect how our love for God and others flows out in practical action. And it might be helpful to reflect on what God is doing, and perhaps what more He needs to do, by way of pruning us so that we can become more truly ourselves and more fruitful in His service as a result.

But you'll probably also have realised that, in terms of 'growing church', this is the 'spiritual growth' part of the agenda. It's about us, and our growing in Christ. So, finally and briefly, what about the numeric growth side of the agenda, and what this might say to us in terms of growing numbers here at Brancepeth?

I'd like to make a distinction here which might be helpful in our thinking. The distinction is between the core and the periphery. The core is those who come regularly, join the rotas, give on a regular basis, and so on. The periphery is everyone else who in some way feels a connection to the church. Now of course this isn't meant to be a hard and fast distinction – there are obviously many gradations in between – and it's certainly not meant to be divisive, or to suggest that only those in the core take their faith seriously. But with those caveats, it might be helpful in this way. First, that we need to acknowledge that the core is relatively small and ageing, which means that, unless we bring in more, younger members, the Church here may not have much of a future in 10-20 years' time. And second, we need to appreciate that the periphery is actually very large. Think of all those who come occasionally. Think of all the people who have been married here in recent years, or have bought their children here for baptism, or who have come here for a funeral, and their families and friends. Think of all the people from the Village and beyond who come at Christmas and Easter, or for other special services like All Souls. Think of Messy Church where the distinction between core and periphery is rather less clear. Think of Youth Club. And so on.

That's a lot of people who, in the main, hold the Church in high regard, have a spiritual hunger, and want the Church to be here for them into the future. And I don't think we need to be at all reserved in saying to all those various groups of people, probably in a whole variety of different ways, that we would love them to come and share their spiritual journey with us, and that we need some at least of them to become core members. I'm not saying we don't do anything in this 'space' already – we clearly do. But perhaps we can and, under God, should do more here. And perhaps that is part of what being fruitful, part of what sharing our love for God and for others, might mean for us individually and collectively.

To be discussed further, perhaps ...

Amen