

MASS OF THANKSGIVING (APCM) 29th April 2018/Easter V
St Michael & All Angels, Barnes

GARDENER'S QUESTION TIME

Perhaps it's a sign of age, but one of the highlights of my week is listening to Gardener's Question Time on radio 4 - it's sad, but it's true

Last week, someone asked this question of the GQT panel:

'We often talk about low-maintenance plants, but what's the most high-maintenance plant you can think of?'

And the answer given by one of the experts was this – a grape vine.

Because, he said, they need lots of looking after, careful pruning, in the right way, at the right time, but despite these challenges, they are worth it in the end because of the wonderful fruit.

Jesus would have known all this.

That's why he compares his Church to a grapevine.

Hard work.

But worth it.

Because of the fruit.

Today we celebrate the *'hard work but worth it'* nature of our life as a parish, and the fruits that come about because of it.

Giving thanks for the recent past, rejoicing in the present, and looking forward to the future – and offering it all to God.

REIMAGINING BRITAIN

I say this at a time when we are about to enter into a period of great change. This time next year, we will be a different nation, with a different relationship to the rest of the world. A different definition of who we are as a people.

In his book *'Reimagining Britain'*, the Archbishop of Canterbury describes this not just as a moment, but as an *opportunity*.

Whether we voted remain or leave, this is a pivotal point in our history.

We should be naively optimistic that everything's going to return to a golden age of glory. Nor should we be unduly apocalyptic about the future.

Instead, we should see it for what it is – a chance to reimagine who and what we are as a nation. He writes:

‘When changes are especially dramatic, they call for reimagining on a grand scale, for an interpretation of our ancient meta-narrative that is faithful to the past, that is adapted to the present, and that guards the hopes of those to come in the future’.

Basically, it’s a book about **hope**.

A hope anchored in the past, while engaging with the present, to build a new future together where the maximum number of people can flourish and grow. Hard work - but worth it.

The ‘meta-narrative’ mentioned by the Archbishop is, unsurprisingly, a Christian one.

He believes, that the Christian story is the only story that can root us in the past, while also leading us to a new self-understanding.

That’s because it is a generous and hospitable story, which can hold together a diverse and plural nation which contains within it many competing ideas of truth. It is this tradition that can provide coherence, but not enforce conformity.

We have an opportunity that comes by only very rarely – and we must seize it, or become something we don’t want to be.

REIMAGINING CHURCH

What the Archbishop has to say about reimagining the nation, might also be said about the Church of England as a whole, and also individual parishes like St Michael’s.

We too, are seeking to serve a diverse and plural community.

In a parish where ideas of truth and meaning will often only have the vaguest connection to the Christian narrative – if at all.

The danger in this situation is that we end up talking to smaller and smaller groups – an ever diminishing circle of people who understand our language and customs.

In this context, many people have asked whether the parish is still relevant. Whether the whole structure of the Church is sustainable or appropriate today?

In reaction to this, others have reaffirmed the role of the parish as the foundational means of presence and engagement in the community, at the most grass-roots level.

The truth, as ever, probably lies between extremes.

There are many dismal stories that can be told of dying parishes and closing church – that have failed to engage with the changed and changing communities around them.

Talking only to themselves and not to others.

They have failed to recognise the reality that the Christian narrative cannot be taken for granted.

But we can also tell many good stories.

Of parishes that are responding imaginatively and creatively, become places of renewal and blessing. That don't just survive but THRIVE.

I AM THE VINE, YOU ARE THE BRANCHES

When I arrived as Vicar, one of the first texts I gave to the PCC to reflect on was this Gospel about the vine and branches. And I asked this question: *'What might need to be pruned at St Michael's so that it can truly grow, thrive, and bear fruit?'*

Notice that Jesus describes two kinds of branches.

There are the *branches that do not bear fruit at all* and these just need to be removed.

And there are *the branches that bear fruit already*, but could bear so much more.

Both involve pruning.

Both can be hard.

But the results are different.

They ask us two different questions.

What do we need to stop doing, because it is no longer relevant or helpful?

What do we need to continue doing, but perhaps differently, so that it produces even more abundantly?

We ask ourselves these questions, and act on them, because we do not subscribe to the inevitable story of decline and irrelevance that is told by the secular press and popular media.

We believe in a different story, one in which the Gospel is always relevant and always leads to new growth.

If we abide in Christ, if we are truly connected to him, then we will ALWAYS bear much fruit.

THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH

I want to bring in at this point the strange story of the Ethiopian Eunuch we heard from Acts, and what it might be saying to us.

Here is a person that the Apostle Philip doesn't know what to do with – he is unusual – in terms of race, gender, sexuality, spirituality and background – is he really 'disciple material'?

Philip seems reticent, until the Holy Spirit compels him forward: *do we welcome people in all their God-given diversity?*

The Ethiopian is already reading the prophet Isaiah and Philip shows him how it relates to Christ. *Do we make the most of the spiritual hunger in our community, revealing Christ through it rather than rejecting it?*

The Ethiopian asks, 'What is to prevent me being baptised?' *Do we place obstacles in people's way to faith, or do we make it possible and easy for people to hear and come to Christ?*

He goes on his way rejoicing . *Does the expression of our faith bring joy to others?*

EASTERTIDE APCM

It is significant, that the APCM generally takes place during the season of Easter.

When the women go to the tomb, the angel says to them 'He is not here – he is risen!'

There are words filled with hope.

Hope of a future filled with new life.

This is the season of hope and new life.

When we rejoice that Christ has risen from the grave and give us new life, by sharing his own vitality with us.

The Resurrection changed the world's narrative forever, and it is this story of life and hope that we celebrate together today as we hold our annual meeting.

At the very end of Matthew's Gospel, our Lord commissions the disciples and sends them out, assuring them of his presence always.

It is with this same confidence in Jesus's words of his abiding presence in us that we share the Good News with our parish and with all we come into contact with.

It is with confidence in the providence of God that we are thankful for all his mercies and blessings over the past year and look forward to hope to the coming year, to see how God will reimagine us and make us bear fruit abundantly to his glory.