

# Mark 4.21–34

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## *Health & Faith–Raising*

Amington Church

Sunday 5 November 2017

Vision Sunday / Mark: Seeing Jesus (9)

### **Vision**

What do you call a deer without eyes? No idea...

What did the mummy contact lens say to the naughty child contact lens? I've had enough, go and sit in the cornea.

What do you call a deer with no eyes and no legs? Still no idea...

If a random person in the street stopped you and asked, 'What is your church's vision?' – I wonder what you might say? I *hope* some of you might say, ¶ 'following Jesus together'.

You aren't following me, you aren't following the church wardens or the Readers – we are all, *together*, following *Jesus*. That's what we're about as a church family. We might expand that with two additional phrases ¶: ¶ getting to know Jesus together, and ¶ introducing others to Jesus. This is what we are about as a church.

And if it needs to be made any clearer, **J** it means Jesus is and should be at the centre of everything we do.

We also have a church family prayer, **J** from Philippians 1. If you aren't praying this prayer every day, please can I encourage you to do so? It is printed each week on the news sheet, and there are some little prayer cards at the back for you to put on your fridge or bedside table, or wherever you'll see it and remember to pray it every day.

This is our vision as a church family – following Jesus together, abounding in love and depth and discernment, filled with the fruit of righteousness, living for the glory and praise of God. I hope that picture of a church is one that fills you with excitement and hope, that you are willing to support it (don't all shout at once).

## **‘All by itself’**

But what does all that mean in practice? What does it look like? Some churches create five-year master plans, strategies, long-term goals and action plans – but I don't think that's right. To me, our calling is to be a faithful and healthy church family in Amington. And, if you remember my presentation six months ago, about this very passage in Mark, healthy things grow.

Jesus said, ¶ The kingdom of God is like this...

¶ **A man scatters seed on the ground** (26)... ¶ **night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up... ¶ the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how** (27).

**All by itself the soil produces corn...** ('all by itself' = *automate*, or automatically) ¶ **first the stalk, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear** (28).

In case you're worried I didn't know what grain looks like, ¶ here's some grain ready to be harvested (!).

¶ And this is what harvesting grain looks like today. **As soon as the corn is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come** (29).

God doesn't do a lot in this parable – but that's because he's already done it. God made the soil, the seed, the sun and the rain to work together, so the growth happens *all by itself*. God doesn't zap the little seed with his finger to make it grow – the seed grows, because growth is a *fundamental* part of everything God has made.

But the farmer doesn't do much either. Once he's sown the seed it doesn't matter whether he sleeps or gets up – his job is done, until it's time to harvest the ripe grain.

Except there *is* something else the farmer has done, that Jesus doesn't mention here, but which is obvious to anyone who has ever done any gardening. When you plant seeds, do you simply throw them on any old ground?

No... *first*, you must prepare the soil: you dig the ground, you turn it over with a fork, you spread some compost perhaps, some feed – and only *then* do you plant the seed.

I have spent a long time reflecting on this parable. Are we the farmer? Are we the seed? Are we the harvest? Is *God* the farmer? Is the gospel the seed?

And I realised those questions all miss the point.

Jesus says, **'the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces corn'** (27-28).

There is a hidden power in the kingdom of God, a hidden power to grow, which you cannot force by violence or dissect with a knife. This is the point of Jesus' parable. Whether we are the farmer, faithfully doing our part and letting God do the rest, or the seed, which God made to sprout and grow, or the soil, which takes and nurtures the seed – it doesn't matter. The point is: we don't know how growth happens, but it does, *when the conditions are right*.

# Holidays

§ What makes the perfect holiday?

Maybe it doesn't matter where you are, as long as it's § hot and there's a § beach? Perhaps you can't stand sitting around all day and prefer activity holidays, like § white-water rafting, or cycling, or hiking.

Perhaps you like § city breaks, the hustle and bustle of a new place to explore – or the complete opposite, perhaps you prefer to be several thousand feet high, § on a mountain, with fresh, crisp air and not a soul in sight.

Perhaps you simply want some § peace and quiet, to read a book or listen to some music. Or maybe it doesn't matter where you are or what you do, as long as you have § wine.

Or, perhaps you could be anywhere in the world, or doing anything you like, but it's still the best holiday because you're with the right person §. There we are on Barmouth bridge last week.

The point is, like Jesus' parable, there are lots of different things that go into making the perfect holiday – there are lots of different things that go into growing a seed – and there are lots of different things that go into a healthy church.

# Healthy Church

Because, friends, that's what I want us to be. I want us to grow more healthy as a church family: ¶ following Jesus together, ¶ getting to know Jesus better, and ¶ introducing others to Jesus.

The more we work on these things, the more healthy we will be as a church family. And as that happens, all by itself the kingdom grows, within us, putting down deep roots into God, and out from us, into our community, among our friends and family.

## Money

Now there is one aspect of following Jesus that we Brits don't like to talk about: ¶ money *show picture of cash notes*. Or, if you're St Editha's Amington: ¶ money *show picture of cash coins*.

To put it bluntly, this church has money problems. We do not pay our way. We are able to cover all the bills for running the church and the church office, but not our cost to the diocese.

Every year the diocese asks each church to make a contribution to the costs of running the Church of England. This ¶ Common Fund includes the cost of ¶ vicars (stipend, pension, vicarage), ¶ people training to be vicars, curates, ¶ diocesan staff, and so on.

It's actually a great way to § share the cost of running the Church of England between churches.

§ Time for some numbers. If you add up the cost of all that, and divide it by the number of churches across the diocese, it costs about § £55,000 a year to run the Church of England Birmingham, pay all its clergy, and look after all its houses.

Because we are a small church, we are subsidised by the larger churches, and so the diocese ask us to pay about § £35,000 a year instead of the full £55,000.

But last year we only managed to pay § £19,190. This year we will pay § £21,200. Next year the most we can afford to pay is § £26,400, based on current levels of income.

### *Pause*

It makes for sobering reading, doesn't it? It's important to stress that we don't *owe* the diocese money because we can't afford to pay our contribution. § This isn't a debt – in fact it's a voluntary system – but whatever we don't pay, has to come from somewhere, and it's made up from the contributions *other* churches make.

So, the fact that you have a full time vicar , instead of a part-time vicar, is entirely dependent upon the generosity of other churches.

This is the financial reality. And we need to pay it out of our regular income. We cannot rely on legacies or one-off fundraisers, because they simply paper over the cracks, when the problem is we simply do not get enough regular income to pay our way.

This is the financial reality. The other part is our § giving profile. This is how many people give up to £5 a week (18), £5-£10 a week (14), £10-15 a week (8), £15-20 a week (2), over £20 a week (7).

Now before we carry on, I have no idea where you are in that scale, and frankly I don't want to know. I didn't compile these numbers, so I have no idea where you all fit into that. But I do want us, over during November, to think for ourselves about what we give. We will be thinking about it on Sundays in the sermons – and please discuss it at home, in your house groups perhaps.

And I'd like us to do that, *not* because § the church needs cash. We do, but actually that's irrelevant when it comes to giving. If we were rolling in it, paying so much we could support other churches instead of receiving support from them – even if it were like that, I would preach exactly the same messages this month.



Because, **!** giving is not fundraising – giving is **!** *faithraising*. Giving financially is a vital way of us both expressing our gratitude to God, and demonstrating our trust in him – that he is most important to us, not our possessions or our bank balance.

You know, Jesus told thirty-eight parables – and sixteen of them, that's nearly *half*, were about money or possessions. He knew how important this is, and how difficult a message it is to hear. We will be looking at some of what he said over the next three weeks, to help us think for ourselves about financial giving.

Friends, I want you to hear this. My goal for this month is not about increasing the amount of money this church has. Really. I know we need it, but what we need *more* is women and men of *faith*, people who are passionate about serving God, sharing the good news with others.

I hope you believe that, because it is the truth. I care far more about your faith than our funds – but I also know that some things help grow faith more than others. Evangelism is one. Praying for healing is another. And giving financially is another.

So it's important to think about and wrestle with these questions.

# Six Steps in Christian Giving

I'd like to introduce you to § 'Six Steps in Christian Giving'. It's a helpful way to show the ways of supporting a church financially.

## 1. Survival

§ A person on this step might say, 'I give a bit when I am asked because the church ought to be there in case I need it.' This person can only just survive, and there is a chance the church might help. The relationship is: I know the church is there if I need it, but all being well, I won't!

## 2. Supermarket

§ A person on this step might say, 'I am happy to pay for the cost of the bits of the church that I want to enjoy.' This person needs security. The relationship is: I treat the church on my own terms and feel safe and unchallenged. I see myself more as a customer, paying for a service.

## 3. Support

§ A person on this step might say, 'The work of the church is important to me, so I will support it.' This person needs to belong. The relationship is: I see myself as a proper member of the Church's supporters' club.

## 4. Subscription

§ A person on this step might say, 'I see myself as a member and I will to contribute my fair share of the costs.' This person needs to be recognised. The relationship is: I am part of this church and I play my part.

## 5. Submission

§ A person on this step might say, 'My understanding of being a disciple is that I should put God first in my life.' This person sees a deeper meaning in life. The relationship is: my giving responds to God and not only to the needs of the church.

## 6. Sacrifice

§ A person on this step might say, 'I truly believe my Lord "demands my soul, my life, my all".' This person sees their calling to be Christ-like. The relationship is: I naturally give both joyfully and sacrificially, because Jesus is what's most important to me.

§ I wonder which step you are on right now? I wonder, is it time you took a step to where God is calling you?

Friends, I cannot say this enough: this is not about fundraising, it is about faithraising. Taking a step along this path can be painful and difficult. But that's the point: doing so raises our faith.

At the back of church there is a stack of these leaflets for you all to take home and think about over the next month. Please take one away with you when you go home this morning.

Please remember: this is not about the church needing money. This is about us, the church family in Amington, following Jesus together. This is about us, God's sons and daughters, giving back to God out of what he has given us. This is about us becoming more healthy – and growing like a little seed planted in good soil – though we don't know how.