

Matthew 13.1–23

Vision Sunday

Amington

Sunday 28 April 2019

Part I: The Life You've Always Wanted

What is a church?

I'm going to ask you a question. It might seem an odd question to ask, as if it's one we should really know the answer to... **]** what is a church? I'm going to put three pictures on the screen:

- **]** *organisation chart*
- **]** *church building*
- **]** *family holding hands*

Pause – which do you think it is?

I saw this cartoon in the *Church Times* recently... **]** *Dave Walker's Where the church is*. Most of the time, when you hear me use the word church, I add another one after it... *family*; most of the time you'll hear me talk about the church *family*. So perhaps *that* is what a church is?

Of course, it's a slight trick: it's actually all three.

¶ The church *is* an organisation – for example, the Church of England. At the top there maybe we have the archbishop, then bishops, and so on. The church of St Editha Amington is also an organisation – and we're about to have its annual meetings in an hour or so.

¶ The church *is* also a building. To many people outside our church *family*, this is probably the main meaning of the word 'church'. The 'church' has to be looked after, lit, heated, repaired, insured, cleaned – it has a *lot* of needs.

¶ And finally the church *is* a family, or rather a *gathered* family – this is the original meaning of the word 'church'. We, the people who gather together in Jesus' name, during the week and on Sundays, *are* the church. And thankfully we are a little more diverse than the clipart I was able to find online.

And there have been *big* changes in all three recently – in terms of organisation (I'll come back to that later), in terms of the building – new A/V system, new lights, new kitchenette, and soon the toilet will be refurbished too – and in terms of the family...

... take a look at this graph ¶.

The blue dots are adults, the orange are children. The wibbly lines you can see are a six-month rolling average of the total number of people who attended church on that day.

Friends, this is *good news*. Attendance isn't everything, but it is one of the important markers of how healthy a church is. It shows us that we haven't had fewer than 40 adults on a Sunday *since 11 February... last year*. ¶ The 10.30 graph is even more encouraging – adult attendance has grown by over 50% since the low point, in the middle of June 2016, and the number of children has grown as well – slightly... we now have 1.4 more children on an average Sunday than we did three years ago!

We can't rest on our laurels though – ¶ this map shows everyone from our church directory who lives in Amington – the pins aren't quite in the right place, but hey! We are quite well spread across Amington, but there are some big gaps – the streets off Sheepcote Lane, and the area around the Kerria in particular. We need to find ways of reaching out and connecting with everyone in our parish – hopefully the Place of Welcome, which Mandy will tell us about later, will help with that.

Good earth

The manager of the garden centre heard one of her staff talking to a customer. ‘No, we haven’t had any of that in ages,’ said the staff member, ‘And I don’t know when we’ll be getting any more.’

The customer left and the manager walked over to tell the member of staff off. ‘Never tell a customer we can’t get them something,’ she said. ‘Whatever they want we can always get it on order and deliver it. Do you understand?’ The staff member nodded.

‘So what did he want?’ asked the manager.

‘Rain.’

I’d like to read to you one of Jesus’ parables, from *The Message*.

¶ Jesus left the house and sat on the beach. In no time at all a crowd gathered along the shoreline, forcing him to get into a boat. Using the boat as a pulpit, he addressed his congregation, telling stories.

‘What do you make of this? ¶ A farmer planted seed. As he scattered the seed, some of it fell on the road, and birds ate it. Some fell in the gravel; it sprouted quickly but didn’t put down roots, so when the sun came up it withered just as quickly.

‘Some fell in the weeds; as it came up, it was strangled by the weeds. ¶ Some fell on good earth, and produced a harvest beyond his wildest dreams. ‘Are you listening to this? Really listening?’

Matthew 13.1-9 (The Message)

This farmer is *really* bad at sowing seed – can you imagine buying several packets of seeds from the garden centre, and then chucking it all over the road, on gravel, on ground full of weeds??

No – if you are planting seeds, you plant them carefully in **good earth** – usually earth that you have ¶ painstakingly prepared to make sure the conditions are right for your seed to grow *all by itself*. You can't *force* seed to grow – instead, you do your best to make sure the conditions are right, and then the seeds grow.

In the parable, we are the soil, and seed is the Word of God, the **message about the kingdom** (Matthew 13.19). Jesus told the parable primarily to explain how and why people respond in different ways to the same message.

And I don't know about you, but I desperately want myself, and all of us together, to be **good earth**, so that through us God can produce an amazing **harvest** – this is my prayer, my vision for this church family.

Notice *we* don't produce the harvest, *God does*. It's easy to grow a church – as easy as it is for plants to shoot up in lovely warm, moist, shallow soil. What's much harder, as any gardener will tell you, is preparing soil *properly*, painstakingly removing weeds, turning it over, adding topsoil or fertiliser, shaking loose the clods of earth, and so on. It's a right pain.

But it's how you get the conditions right for strong, lasting growth. And friends, that is what *we* must do as a church family, as disciples of Jesus.

We need to make sure our 'soil' is 'good', that our hearts are ready to respond to God's Word, that we identify and pull out the weeds, the bad, the negative habits and attitudes and mindsets, that will always threaten to take over, and push out the good growth. We need to make sure *our* conditions are right – so the seed of God's Word can grow in our hearts, and transform us by the power of the Spirit, to be more like Jesus.

The Life You've Always Wanted

Jack decided he wanted to start farming chickens so he went to the chicken farmer and bought 1000 chicks.

The next month Jack went back and bought 500 more.

The following month he went to the chicken farmer again and bought another 500 chicks – at which point the chicken farmer commented, 'Your chicken farm must be coming along well now.'

Jack looked glum and replied, 'Sadly no. I'm not sure what I'm doing wrong. Either I'm planting them too deep, or upside down, or too close together...'

Today we're starting a series called 'The Life You've Always Wanted'. It is inspired by a book of that name, by John Ortberg. The aim is to help us all do a bit of gardening, a bit of weeding, a bit of digging, and (hopefully) a bit of planting – so, with God's help, you can live the life you've always wanted.

Imagine this. You receive a call from Sir Mo Farah. He has been busy preparing for the London Marathon (which is happening today, by the way!) but something has gone wrong, and he isn't able to take up his place. He's done some research, looking for the person best able to replace him – and your name was top of the list.

I can see from your faces what your reaction might be to such a phone call. I mean, what an honour – and yet totally horrific. I can barely run a quarter of a mile, let alone *twenty-six*.

I could try my very best – I could wear all the right gear, I could turn up on time, I could even do the Mobot – I could try my very best – *but still I would fail miserably*.

Why? Because trying hard only gets you so far. Mo Farah has been running and training almost his entire life – believe it or not, I haven't – and that is how *he* is able to compete at such an elite level – and why I cannot. I could try, but I would fail.

Think of it another way. ¶ Who here *can't* play the guitar? Imagine one Sunday Mark isn't very well, so he can't play – but when you arrive, I hand you his guitar and tell you to get on with it...! No matter how hard you try, *you would fail* – why? Because playing a musical instrument requires a significant amount of training.

Or how about this one: ¶ you are sent to the deepest most remote part of China, and expected to explain to the locals in Mandarin who Jesus is. You simply can't do it, *no matter how hard you try*.

What am I waffling on about?

Friends, the life you've always wanted is Jesus' life – in all sorts of ways. Our life starts with him – we don't need to try hard to get his love, or earn a fresh start, a new life. *Our* life truly begins when we receive the free gift of *Jesus'* life, no matter how old we are.

And, Jesus is also the best example of what it means to be human. So if you want to live your life in the best way, if you want life in all its fulness – you need to become more like Jesus. And, friends, becoming more like Jesus is like running a marathon, playing a musical instrument or speaking a foreign language...

It's not something you can do by trying hard – you need to train.

Paul often used the language of athletics, training, competing – why? Because **becoming more like Jesus is not something we can do by trying hard – we need to train.**

How do we do that? Well, my hope and prayer is that, **!** over the next few weeks, we will together start working through an answer to that question – we will start to learn what it means to make sure we are like that **good earth** in Jesus' parable: ready to receive the seed of God's Word, and to grow.