

Romans 6:1b-11 & Matthew 10:24-31

FRUITFUL CHURCH

This is going to be a kind of 'taking stock' sermon – and as such is not very strongly linked to either Paul's theology of death and resurrection or Jesus' collection of sayings from Matthew 10. However, there's a chance after the service for anyone who wants to talk about the readings (or about the substance of this talk) to do so over coffee – I'm always up for that.

So, in order to help us this morning to take stock as a church, I'd like us to think about three things which, for the sake of easy recall, all rhyme! You might like to discuss these further in home groups and small groups as well.

They are vocation, experimentation, and contemplation.

1. Vocation

I wasn't much of a gardener before Covid. I felt as though I had no skill to nurture plants, know where in the garden they would thrive or really grow anything at all successfully. When we lived in Whitchurch, I was so busy pulling up things I thought shouldn't be growing there, that I failed to observe what was emerging and what might be left to flourish with very little interference. Apart from spring bulbs, which seemed reasonably straightforward, I didn't know how to prolonging any flowering in the garden past about April. That is, until the summer of 2019.

That last summer at Whitchurch something large started growing out of a compost heap we had inadvertently created out of grass clippings dumped in one corner of the front garden. We didn't know what it was. Luckily, I didn't earnestly weed it out but started observing it instead. It started appearing in about May and grew and grew and grew for 12 weeks till it was about 10 feet tall, sending out further massive stems and covered in dozens of flowers. It was an enormous 10-foot yellow hollyhock.

Since we had laboured to make other small plants grow that had not particularly flourished, and here was this plant we had had almost nothing to do with bursting out of the ground apparently with no effort, both Chris and I (as we marvelled at the giant yellow hollyhock over breakfast each morning) felt that God might be trying to show us something about flourishing.

How this enormous plant was somehow a picture of abundance and invitation in church life, rather than scarcity and hard work. How it was God's work to make things

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grow, and ours to be invited to join in rather than us being driven to 'try and work harder' at being Christians (or even as gardeners!)

What fruitfulness was God calling us into as we left behind one season in south Oxfordshire and began another in Reading? What parts of the Christian vocation were about to be nurtured and which parts were going to be stretched?

That's a good question for churches too. A church where people are realistically looking at their callings from God and living them out joyfully, is a church where growth is happening naturally. Churches have not always been good at nurturing vocation. We've been far too narrow in our definitions, and we've subtly praised certain professions over others as being callings.

Not many people are going to be ordained priest, but everyone has a calling to be like the teacher, Jesus. "It is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher", says our reading. That's the primary vocation of all of us. How that then plays out is secondary – but you can know that if you're connecting with your God-given calling, it will feel as though growth is natural and others will be blessed through it.

Vocation-themed conversations are something that I'm always up for (& there are other people in church trained to listen well, too) so I commend the idea of living within the flow of your vocation, both in church life and in your Monday-Friday lives.

Sometimes we have to fertilise the growth with a bit of extra food, especially at difficult times. Plants that have been going for years can get weary and hungry – it's amazing what a bit of good food & more space for roots can achieve. 'Let the one who has ears to hear, listen!'

2. Experimentation

I'm not sure the Church has been good at this either. The word *experimentation* sounds more like something a scientist does. But there are other undertakings in life where experimentation is a component: parenting; gardening; interior decoration; abstract art; cooking (to a certain extent!) I wonder what experimentation might look like in the life of our church and what qualities we need to be confident to do it.

One main area of exploration, at least, that is currently occupying us, is the question of employing someone to boost our work with children and young people. It'd be hard to find a church these days where children and young people were not a priority, and they are certainly one as far as we're concerned. Along with community, school; 'going deeper' and Eco matters, nurturing and reaching out to children and youth is one of our five mission priorities

<https://www.stjohnandststephen.org.uk/about-the-church/vision-and-mission>

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It's obvious, of course, but passing on the faith in ways that make it accessible and real for our children and young people is something we all need to own. It's always going to be the case that there are some in the church with the particular gifts, calling or experience to work directly with children – but the health of the body of Christ in all the ages we represent is everybody's business.

In a quick show of hands – could you indicate if you came to faith in Christ (in however simple or otherwise manner) before the age of 18 (raise your hand). It has been said that most practising Christians in churches today came to faith before the age of 18 (I haven't been able to find statistics of this, but it makes sense somehow).

We've invested in children and young people at this church down the years, but society has changed considerably over the lifetime of St John and St Stephen's and some of that rapid cultural change has caught the liturgical churches, used to doing things the same way for centuries, off-guard. As Christianity has ebbed out of society, children and young people are less and less likely to stumble across the faith unless someone has deliberately set out to share it or nurture them in it.

And we haven't done all that well with the generation that currently encompasses the 20-somethings. Generation Z (born between the late 1990s and early 2010s) are currently coming into their maturity, with the oldest in this cohort now in their late 20s, and the youngest in their mid-teens. They've been dubbed 'Generation Sensible' after research showed that they're less likely than previous generations to indulge in casual sex, drugs or alcohol (even when at Glastonbury).

In the book *Gen Z, Explained* (2021) Religion sociologist, Linda Woodhead, and her co-authors, carried out extensive interviews with this age group, both in the UK and US. The number one concern for Gen Z in both countries was the climate and the environment and their top two values were identity and authenticity.

Issues that directly impact how they might experience the Church are a deep distrust of authority and a desire to explore what the book calls 'fine-grained identities' and life lived authentically. They are at home with diversity and are likely to view any group that excludes others on the basis of sexuality with deep suspicion. They are also nervous of absolute truth claims and more likely to chime with faith that actively makes a difference in the world.

A quotation from the cover says, 'Gen Z emerges here as an extraordinarily thoughtful, promising and perceptive generation that is sounding a warning to their elders.' The writers go on to say, 'this group of young people are as compassionate and imaginative as any that has come before, and understanding the way they tackle problems may enable us to envisage new kinds of solutions.'

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This is shaping up to be the missing generation in church. What a great loss. We need them to shape the way we do church and the way we face the world that is sometimes so baffling and uncertain. When we think of 'youth' we probably need to consider the needs and aspirations of this missing generation who are more open to spiritual things than my generation, born in the 60s and 70s.

'Springtide Research Institute found that Gen Z-ers are not turning their backs on religion, and the growing number of young adults who embrace spirituality cope better with the mental health challenges from Covid-19.'

(<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12007577/Gen-Z-NOT-turning-away-God-young-adults-say-believe-higher-power.html#:~:text=Springtide%20Research%20Institute%2C%20a%20nonpartisan,held%20steady%20for%20several%20years.>)

The opportunities for churches to find common ground here would seem to be considerable.

When Ian MacDonald, the Youth Advisor at the Diocese came to talk with the PCC on Monday, he highlighted the benefits of intergenerational worship. In other words, whereas very big churches have strict age-related groups who learn from a programme of content, as a medium sized church, we could further experiment with ways in which we all grow in faith together.

We are already doing this in our monthly all age service and in Forest Church. All ages doing faith together is such a healthy sign of growth. There will be dads and mums who are drawn in via their children who haven't had the chance to encounter living faith themselves. How else could we develop all-age church life?

When was the last time, whilst planning activities for church we asked ourselves, would this be suitable for young dads? for teenagers? How good are we at spotting the emerging vocations of a 10-year-old or even a 5-year-old?

As we explore what (or who) it is we want to come alongside us in this, may we keep praying and seeking God's will and all of us own the work of passing on the faith.

Which brings us to the final point:

3. Contemplation

In an active church we have to keep remembering prayer. Action and contemplation go together. Back in November we had a prayer time here on a Saturday morning. We were able to sit in silence in the main body of the church – something we especially

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came to value in Covid when we couldn't be more vocal. The making space, the stillness, the quiet, all these are so vital for an active church – for any church.

After that we moved to the gallery to share the mission concern that seemed pressing at the time – how to re-invigorate the café. We were looking into the Local Pantry idea but ended up joining in with national scheme to offer a Warm Space and add in a couple of more focussed activities.

Fast forward 7 months and we are seeing new people come into the café in the mornings, especially for the kids café on a Monday and the lunch on a Tuesday. We have recruited more volunteers, some of whom don't even worship here but wanted to join with something local that makes a positive difference. So it's not always us 'doing good' to others – but us collaborating with those that share our concerns and serving the community together.

'You do not have because you do not ask', said James in his Epistle. I encourage us to get together for another prayer morning – it's going to be Sat. 9th July here at 10. Silence and listening first and sharing and interceding afterwards – a powerful combination. We're going to need plenty of imagination and guidance as we make a foray into an area of recruitment and shared ministry the church hasn't gone into for a while.

Vocation, experimentation, and contemplation. May God help us to discern our individual and our corporate calling; may we find the right fertiliser to put on them to feed them, and may we be given courage and imagination as we experiment with different ways to enter into the growth that God has planned for us, in whatever generation.

In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

