

God is doing something new in Suffolk.

To pick up words from our first reading, words from the prophet Isaiah, words from the 6th century BC, God's presence, God's spirit, God's word is like the rain from heaven, watering the earth, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, and the people will go out in joy and return in peace. It is a high vision, and our God is the same God and the vision is no different. God is doing something new in Suffolk, just as God is continually doing something new through the ages and across the world – drawing us into his world of justice, mercy and compassion, his world of joy and peace, drawing us into his world, his kingdom, so that this world will be more and more his world.

And the opening words of that same reading, "Seek the Lord while he may be found" are words for us today, "call upon him while he is near" are words for us – he is with us, not far away, not forgetting us, not busy in Norfolk, though he is that too; he is near, he is here to be found and followed.

God is doing something new in Suffolk, and it is for us to catch up and join in. It is about justice and mercy and compassion. It is about giving glory to God and not ourselves, it is about living for others and not ourselves. It means learning, taking risks, trying new things, holding on to the good, and working for the good. But it is always joining in what God is doing, it is about going with the grain of God, not against it.

God is doing something new in Suffolk, and there are plenty of glimpses of that we can think of today and from our past.

So I am grateful to people who read the Church Times and let me know when there is something in it I should be aware of, so my special thanks today to Caroline Redman for pointing out to me, while I was sitting in her and Tony's kitchen yesterday morning, that

there is a timely article in the Church Times this week; about the strengthening of the church's presence and ministry in housing estates. The article is entitled "Faith, bricks and mortar, and reinforced concrete." And no, I have not brought the wrong sermon, the one intended for the installation of the new Archdeacon of Ipswich. I mention this and its timeliness for today for the reason Caroline drew it to my attention. A few paragraphs in:

"When the Revd F D Perrott became Vicar of the parish of Ixworth, in Suffolk, in 1888, he found that "the Church had scarcely anything to do with the people, and the people scarcely anything to do with the Church." I guess it comes as some comfort that some of our challenges are not new. But Mr Perrott was determined to do something about it, and we read he began by helping to form a Trade Union, the Ixworth Agricultural Labourers' Association. Perrott and the Association then carried out a survey of local housing needs.

We read, "This was no rural idyll, and those housing needs were dire. "Armed with the data, Perrott forced – against enormous opposition – the building of the first council housing in rural England, in 1892."

God was doing something new in Suffolk then, and Mr Perrott joined in, going with the grain of God's justice, mercy and compassion.

And of course, the dire, and hidden, needs of the people living in our beautiful county then in the end of the 19th century, make us immediately mindful of the dire, and hidden, needs of people living in our rural communities across our county today. Mr Perrott gathered data, and our wonderful Community Foundation have, with the help of our University, gathered data, which as we well know, show that the needs of many in our communities has been getting worse. We know the challenges of education, housing of accessibility and transport, the challenges of isolation, and the challenges faced by so many of our farmers, compounded by the uncertainties of Brexit.

And Mr Perrott of Ixworth's response is to have the courage and determination to make a difference – and join in that new thing God is doing. So he worked for the innovation of introducing rural council housing. And one of the characteristics of this county, though we are remarkably coy about it, is the ingenuity, creativity and innovation of people rising to challenges, setting up businesses, responding to social needs, caring for the environment. It's all here in Suffolk, innovation just under the surface – and it's here in community projects and enterprises, small businesses tucked away achieving remarkable results, or innovation in our prisons, our health care, our schools, our hospices. It is quite remarkable.

So much of this, like the work of Perrott, is to relieve the needs of the poor and isolated, that all are able to flourish – and we know too that our Suffolk instinct stretches beyond our boundaries to the neediest around the world.

The church has been integral to this and remains so. You have only to look at the church's commitment to education and health, to the relief of poverty, to work with the young. Simon Mattholie, who read our first lesson, has helped us innovate through Sally Gaze's work this past year, and is himself involved in creative responses to rural social housing needs. And Sally Fogden's own enterprising spirit has enabled farmers in need to be better cared for through the Farm Community Network and the Addington Fund, as well as responding to isolation through the extraordinary Rural Coffee Caravan.

So innovation in response to human need is intrinsic to us here. And that is what we are about today. We are doing something new, for the sake of the neediest in our communities, so that we can serve Jesus' call to be good news to the poor. And good news is not just pious words, but about people's lives being transformed for good. An Archdeacon for Rural Mission – who, for the lawyers and pedants among us, is not an archdeacon in the usual sense, and is not being invested with those mysterious

archdiaconal powers, but is being commissioned to work with all who will work with us to renew the life of the church in our rural communities, aiming to support Christian people in all our villages to set up new Christian communities, reaching those whom we may not be reaching today, to join in the new thing God is doing in our midst.

She has already begun this work, under the banner of Lightwave, setting up new groups of people who gather for prayer and action. Our ambitious aim is to have 1500 more people who have become committed Christians over the next six years. But we do not do this for our own sake – and not for the sake of the church, but for the sake of joining in the new thing God is doing among us.

But let me return to Mr Perrott. What I did not tell you was what happened next. The year the council housing was built he left Ixworth and four years later left the church's ministry to go into politics.

He was not nearly as effective there as he had been as vicar of Ixworth. And what that reveals to me is what happens when the church forgets that our action, our activities that show and share Christ's practical love in the world, cannot be separated from our life with Jesus. I don't know enough about Perrott to understand what happened, but we all know what happens when we separate action from faith.

The church notoriously ends up doing one or the other. But adoration leads to action; and action without adoration will take us back into our own selves and own purposes and away from what God is doing in our midst.

And that means paying attention to what we don't do, not just what we do. This is the pruning John's gospel speaks of – "He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit." We are not good at this – we try to hold on to everything rather than recognise that pruning leads to more fruit.

What do we need to prune? I'd say this is about attitudes, ideas, assumptions we carry around in us that try to prevent the new that God is doing in our midst. The attitudes, ideas and assumptions that flow from thinking it is just us, just up to us, just up to our efforts. So here are three things I want us to prune, to cut away, to throw into the fire, to enable the new that God is calling us into:

1. The assumption in our small congregation that we are the last congregation that will worship in this or the other place, and so there is no point doing anything. Prune it. Get rid of that. God is longing for all of us to see ourselves as the seeds, the start of the new thing he is doing in our midst – the first of all the future generations. So we must stop feeling sorry for ourselves and believe in God's ways that thank God are not ours.

2. The assumption that the new thing happening on a Wednesday after school that brings thirty parents and children together is not church. They pray, they sing praise to God, they listen to the stories of Scripture – they are the church. Messy, maybe, but faithful. Where the word is shared and bread is broken, there is the church. So prune any expectation that they will somehow become "proper church" – they are that already.

3. The assumption is that we can keep our boundaries and structures and relationships just as they are. Openness, working together, flexibility, agility, forming partnerships, taking risks between congregations and communities is what God calls us ever to. So prune this: that we are fine on our own and don't need to work with, worship with, serve with, anyone else. Alone is not of God, alone we do die. Prune it and live.

So to Sally and all of us, God is doing a new thing here in our midst in Suffolk. It is for us to join in, let go of what gets in the way, and go with the grain of God' justice, mercy and compassion.