

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Third Sunday of Lent

23 March 2025

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Sermon by the Revd Canon Dr Victoria Johnson

One of the joys of my role as Dean of St John's College, Cambridge, is being alongside young people as they learn and grow into themselves and become the people God is calling them to be. The College Prayer, which we say every day, prays that love of one another and all sound learning, may ever grow and prosper here.

It's a lovely idea that love and learning are the foundations of this academic community. But love and learning need work, time, effort and patience are essential.

You cannot play the violin, without putting in the hours, you cannot learn a beautiful piece of music without time and effort. And of course, the best kind of music making requires patience and practice, allowing the musician to flourish, until they make the music their own. You cannot just become a ground-breaking scientist without putting in the work to understand the theories and carry out experiments and collect the data. I suppose any university, or school, or college or place of learning, at its best, is rather like a garden, a place where seeds can be sown, and saplings planted, a place of growth and a place of potential, what might yet be.

If you are a gardener of any sort, or even if you only watch Gardener's world or like tea and cake in Garden Centres- you will know that growth is something for which you have wait. For the seed to become a bud, to become a shoot to become a sprig to become a flower, to become a fruit, is not an instantaneous process, it is something that takes time and nurture.

One of St John's most famous alumni, is William Wordsworth, and as well as writing that beautiful poem about daffodils, 'I wander lonely as a cloud', he also wrote that "the mind is a garden, your thoughts are the seeds, the harvest can either be flowers or weeds." I wonder whether anyone knew that he would become a poet when he came to Cambridge as an undergraduate in 1787. Audrey Hepburn, the actress, who was not a student at St John's, once said: To plant a garden is to believe in tomorrow.

Of course, you will all know, that medieval Cathedrals and abbeys like the one that stood here, were forerunners of universities, they were places of learning and growth, with gardens, and libraries, and colleges of canons, and communities that desired knowledge and wisdom of God.

This Cathedral is still a place of learning and mission and committed to its vocation, and when a new bishop is chosen for this diocese, he or she will know that part of their ministry is to teach and see the people of God grow in faith. I suppose the best kind of Christian community, the best kind of church, is also rather like a garden and all of us gardeners.

To see anyone or anything flourish and grow is a huge privilege but also requires love, patience, kindness, attention, nurture and sustenance and commitment.

In our Gospel reading this week, Jesus tells of a man who owns a vineyard and had planted a fig tree.

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But for three years this fig tree had not produced any fruit. It had become tired. It was not growing. The owner would like to dig it up and plant something new, but the gardener, who perhaps sees potential more than most, is determined to give the little fig tree a second chance by feeding and tending it. The gardener pleads with the owner for another year and promises to tend the tree and fertilize it with the best manure, working hard to dig in the nutrients and give this little tree the best chance at growth and the best chance to bear fruit. He puts his faith in it and he is prepared to wait for it to grow.

It's perhaps no accident that images of trees, gardens and growth run through the scriptures, beginning in the Garden of Eden, the place where humanity's potential is first seen. The Tree of Life also stood in the Garden of Eden. Its fruit granted immortality to those who consumed it. Part of the story of the passion takes place in a Garden, the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus goes to pray and contemplate what he is being asked to do. Jesus is crucified on the wood of a cross, and Christian artists in the Middle Ages frequently pictured the cross as a kind of tree drawing a connection between fruitfulness and the Crucifixion, presenting an image of new life arising out of Jesus' sacrificial death. In some instances, the cross was depicted as the Tree of Life. From death, new life and new hope would come. In portraying the cross as the Tree of Life artists echoed the idea that Jesus' death granted humanity access to eternal life and of course, early in the morning, on the first day of the week, Jesus, who everyone thought was buried in the tomb, is mistaken to be the gardener.

Today Jesus tells a parable about a Fig Tree, a symbolic tree in the Hebrew scriptures: when a fig tree is fruitful and healthy and blossoming so are the people of God, when a fig tree bears no fruit, and is withering, the people of God are becoming distant from their maker. So it's no accident that Jesus Parable involves a fig tree. Jesus calls the people to repentance, he calls them back to their God, so that they might make a new start in him.

Through this parable Jesus is inviting us into a world where God desires to help us grow and mature so that every part of our lives will bear fruit and God will wait for it to happen. We are not on our own. The gardener is near and knows how to help us grow. We only have to commit to spending time with him.

We believe in a God who has faith in us, who believes in us and sees our potential for flourishing and growth, a God is like a gardener who tends, nurtures and sustains us through a love stronger than death.

That should give us confidence as we continue our journey through Lent, to be people who see the potential in others and through tenderness, nurture, kindness and love, ensure that everyone's potential is fulfilled as children of the living God.

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All of our readings speak of God's commitment to nourishing us, through mercy and love God gives us good food and water, to help us grow spiritually. Come to me everyone who thirsts, God says. In the wilderness God provides water from a rock so that the people may live.

We have this week marked the spring equinox and from the cold and dark winter, we are suddenly seeing signs of new life all around us. Daffodils emerging from the soil, bringing joy to our hearts as Wordsworth described them. Cherry trees turning pink and white with blossom. We have waited for this flowering and year by year we are not disappointed. Growth is all around us.

As the days lengthen and the earth spends longer in the light of day, this Lent we might spend longer in the light of God's presence, learning from Jesus, and the seeds of faith which have been long buried within us, might grow and prosper like everything around us, into love for God and love for all people.

We pray that this lent there might be a springtime for our life in Christ and that we may bear the fruit God is waiting for.

To his name be glory forever. Amen.