

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

Most Saturdays when the weather is reasonable Scott and James and Andrew cycle up to Durham where the boys sing with the Durham Cathedral Young Singers. They leave (ideally!) just after 7 and arrive in Durham around about 10am just in time for them to have the obligatory jam, scone and cream in the crypt before going off and singing.

The boys see many sights and sounds but one of the things they've commented on is an old and gnarled and dead oak tree on the way to Newton Aycliffe. It looks it was struck by lightning or overcome by some disease. I passed it yesterday on the way to Durham and it really is quite an incredible sight. This is a tree that is utterly dead.

But what fascinates them is that there is a pine tree growing out of one of the old dead branches.

We have no idea how long the tree has been dead, nor indeed how long the pine tree has been growing for but new life is beginning within the tree even when it seems that all is lost and the tree is dead. Growth found its way against what seems like impossible odds. Not necessarily in the way we would expect but growth none the less.

And so it is with so many things which happen which don't make sense – we only need to read and look at the news. Wars, natural disasters, the awful shooting in New Zealand, much suffering. And then we have the confusion over where we are heading with Brexit. Add on to that the things which happen in our own lives which don't make sense.

Right throughout time but almost without fail it is interesting and heartening to see that following bad things that happen there eventually becomes a forward moving trajectory not necessarily in the way we would expect or anticipate but nonetheless with a sense of forward direction. A sense of hope, of renewal and of second chances.

I recently read a book by Gaby Doherty who wrote about the Grenfell Tower Disaster. Absolutely horrific. But quickly emerging were the signs of hope, the signs that God's hand was in the rescue and recovery process. People and groups banding together in ways they would never have imagined previously, sports clubs pulling out all the stops to help the community rebuild, and rebuild in a way that recognised the sorrow that had happened but also allowed a pulling together and a moving forwards and upwards in hope for the future. There is always hope.

Our gospel reading starts with stories of disaster – we find Jesus talking to the crowd who are telling him of the bad things that are happening – Pilate has just slaughtered some Galileans and mixed their blood with the blood of the sacrifices in the temple. And many people have been killed in a disaster of a tower falling down. Jewish people believed that bad things happening were God's punishment for sin. Jesus is reassuring the crowds that such disasters and horrors are not caused by our God of love. God would never bring such misery. Human error and human sin can bring about misery but our God is a God of hope and love.

But he does go on to say that as followers of God we do however have a responsibility to lead as good and perfect life as we can and when we do go wrong to say sorry to God and seek forgiveness.

Jesus is a man of stories and goes on to talk about the fig tree – he tells us about a man who had planted a fig tree in his vineyard, and then came back to find fruit. However, there was no fruit to be found and he asks the gardener to cut it down and dig it out as it's wasting precious soil space. However, the gardener suggests that he digs around and manures it. And then if it produces nothing to cut it down.

We have many allotmenters and gardeners in church who can relate to this. There is always that plant that just doesn't seem to do what you want it to do, or produce or bloom as and when. And the temptation is just that – to chop it back, pull it up by its roots and call it a day with it. That was certainly the temptation on our allotment years ago when the gooseberry bush refused to produce fruit. I had plenty of willing boys to help dig it back up but the advice was – give it another go – there's always hope.

And certainly where God is involved there is always hope. Because just like the gardener has suggested to the vineyard owner, so God is telling us that there is always hope, there are always second and third and more chances....God never ever gives up on us. We might give up on God but he never ever gives up on us. God wants nothing more than for us to come back to him if we've strayed away.

Maybe we're all a bit like fig trees – fig trees are amazing – Fig trees are planted in vineyards to help with pollination – they attract huge amounts of bees who then go on and pollinate the vines which grow fruits etc. So the fig trees are really important to the process of growing fruits in vineyards.

So I guess what we really need to think about is what the best way is for us as people of God to produce the fruits of God's kingdom, how do we play our part and what can we do.

Well, for a start we need to always grow towards the Light – we need to move closer to the source of strength and light – i.e. God. Like plants we need food and water and light – we need to be nurtured and tended and fed, we need to be shaped and guided and loved. And as we learn through study and prayer and worship and fellowship and silence we become more deeply rooted in Christ and more confident in the using the gifts and talents which God has given to each of us.

There are opportunities aplenty for us to learn more and to grow in faith and love – it's not too late to join a Lent group and you can join a study group at any point of the year. Holy Week provides some quiet and reflective opportunities to be fed – do have a look on our website, pew sheet, magazine and also the postcards at the back of church which have details of all our HW and Easter services.

There are books and sites online too, and we are blessed with many wise people in our midst. It's never too late to learn.

God delights in us as we blossom and grow for him and in him. Because as we blossom and grow we become more like the person God dreams us to be. God loves us and encourages us and wants to give us everything.

Mary Oliver the American Pulitzer prize winning poet wrote in her poem *The Summer Day* – “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” What are we going to do for God and for each other with our life which we have been blessed with?

How can we help grow God's kingdom here on earth – how are we going to be a people and a place where love works?

We can be a people and a place of warmth and welcome.

We can be people who look out for each other and try and spot the times when they say all is well but actually an extra hug wouldn't go amiss.

We can be people of grace and joy – joyful to be in a relationship with our God who loves us with all his heart. John and I were at a conference yesterday in Durham and one of the things that came out was can we be a people of joy? Can we look like people who have hope in our hearts? Can we look and sound like people who receive joy and show joy from knowing that we have a God who loves us so much that he wants to give us everything.

We can be a people and a church that go beyond our doors and look to see where we can make a difference. We can support our foodbank and our schools, we can listen and affirm, and we can make practical differences and speak for those who are less able to speak up for themselves. We can be people of hope who give second and more chances to people in need who need practical support.

We can keep our eyes and ears and hearts open to see where we can sow seeds of love and compassion. And then we can water those seeds with love.

We have to bear in mind that as we said earlier, life is not always easy – in fact life for many is far from easy and far from how we imagined it might be. In fact there will be some who find life such a struggle that to just get up in the morning is a massive effort and success. And there will be times in our lives when we are not necessarily able to produce the fruit, or be as fruitful as we would hope to be – times when our growth feels stunted. But if we acknowledge that and ask for God's help and nurturing and restoring and healing love and presence then our God won't give up on us. He won't cut us down, or dig us up or uproot us. Rather, he'll journey with us and help replenish and restore us. He'll be like the gardener and gently tend us.

And for the times when we get it wrong! For the things we have done or not done, said or not done.... God will be waiting just as in the story of the prodigal son with his arms wide open ready to welcome us back in to the fold.

Interestingly we never find out what happens to the fig tree in our reading today. We never know whether it produced fruit in the end. But we can be assured that that tree was tended and loved and fed. Just as God wishes to do with us.

Our job is to keep on keeping going forwards, to keep trusting in God and in his incredibly powerful and generous love. Our job is to be rooted in our love and service for God. To try to the best of our ability to be productive people of love in action.

Just as the pine tree found its way to life against what seems like impossible odds, so too God's love finds its way through. Even when all seems lost. May we be people who seek to grow in faith towards your light, allowing ourselves to be nurtured and fed by God and his word. Trusting in our God of hope and love and second chances.

Amen