

In our Gospel reading this morning we have heard of some of the parables told by Jesus in the course of his ministry; simple stories, related to everyday life that convey a profound message. Jesus' parables were very much related to the life experience of his hearers, so he would talk of a house wife losing a coin, a shepherd searching for a lost sheep, a farmer sowing seed. The two we have heard today relate to the seed; they speak of the seeming insignificance of the seed and the huge potential contained within.

This set me thinking on my own love-hate relationship with gardening. In previous Parishes in which I have served, the Rectory has always had a large garden. I suppose it is a throw back to the time when country Rectories had glebe land attached that sometimes amounted to small farms on which the incumbent would graze cattle and sheep to supplement the stipend. Not being a great gardener, I regret to say I always found the large garden a bit of a chore. Time spent trimming hedges and mowing lawns left little time for the more relaxing aspects of gardening. The move to Howth, and with it the division of the Rectory site, have given us a smaller, much more manageable garden. And so for the first time since I was a curate, gardening has become more of a pleasure.

One of the things that has always fascinated me is the phenomenon of the seed that Jesus used as the basis of the two parables we heard today. That tiny speck of seemingly dead material in your hand that contains within it all that is necessary to reproduce a cauliflower, onion, flower, tree or whatever. I recall a parishioner in Ahoghill who was an expert in daffodils once taking a bulb and cutting it in half and showing me the very beginning of the flower that would bloom later in the year.

I recall a story of a Rector passing a particularly well kept garden in his Parish and remarking, ‘Sam, you and God have done a great job in that garden.’ Sam, none too pleased at having to share the credit with anyone, even the Almighty, retorted, ‘Rector, you should have seen it when just God had it!’

In a sense poor Sam was right. He had had the work of preparing the ground, clearing the weeds, digging in compost, watching out for slugs, greenfly, caterpillars and the host of other pests that descend on a garden. And yet without the givenness of the wonder of the seed, growth, warmth of sun, Sam’s best efforts would have been to no avail. So there is something of a joint venture between the gardener and God in the whole process. And so the Rector was right. “Sam, you and God have done a great job in that garden.” What we have here is a coming together the givenness of nature and what the gardener brings in terms of hard work, skill and patience. It is an illustration of God’s grace and my response to that grace, what I choose to do with it and through it. I want to take that idea of God’s grace and my response to that grace into my thoughts this morning.

At the 11:00 service we are welcoming two children into the Church in Baptism. Baptism in itself contains those two elements of grace and my response to that grace. On God’s side all that is necessary for my salvation is already in place; it is for me to pick it up and run with it so to speak. Looking at these two children; in one sense a lot is already determined for them. Their genetic makeup was determined at the moment of conception and through that certain things are already established; the colour of their hair, their eyes, how tall they are likely to grow, even their temperament, their predisposition to certain ailments.

But we are more than just the sum of our chromosomes. We are members of families, of communities, of faith communities. We read newspapers, books; we listen to the radio, we watch television; we access the internet; we have friends, we have work colleagues. I may have been destined to grow to 6'4" and end up bald but so much else has been determined by my background, my family, my education, my friends, my faith. The seeds, so to speak, that have been sown in my life that have borne fruit for good or ill.

What seeds will be planted in the lives of these two children? These young lives will be moulded by the values they absorb from those around them. The key influence of course will come from their parents. There will be the influence of other family members, the friendships they will form, and their teachers in school. Will these influences be weeds or flowers in the garden of these children's lives? How can we as a congregation put flesh on the welcome we proclaim today to children, to strangers who come among us? This can be shown in quite simple ways, a smile of welcome as they slip into the pew, a word of welcome at the exchange of the peace, a word of encouragement as a parent struggles with push chair or a difficult child. Simple things that can contribute to easing that transition from welcome visitor to valued member.

This morning, Aidan and Karen, Michael and Yulia come seeking baptism for Ashling and Lily. They will give undertakings that in bringing up their children they will provide an environment within which the values of the Gospel are upheld. We as a congregation undertake to encourage them in this and that they will be welcome members in the worship and fellowship of this place. May God work in and through us all that Ashling and Lily will grow in the faith in which they are baptised this day.