



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year B

Gardener's World

Readings: Ezekiel 17: 22-24, Ps 91, 2 Corinthians 5: 6-10, Mark 4: 26-34

There is a very moving moment in the resurrection scene with the Magdalene when, in her distress, Mary mistakes her Lord for the Gardener. It is not, I suggest, incidental but rather providential.

We know, from numerous Gospel texts, that Jesus was familiar with the rhythm of the land and many of His parables and examples flow from that 'country boy' experience. Today' Gospel has Him talking about the seed.

For most of my adult life I have been a keen gardener. It has been a continuous process of learning and then experiencing the joy when you get it right. It all started at my training college nearly fifty years ago. Jobs were divided among the students and nobody wanted the task of the garden. I volunteered – how often do you get the chance to fashion a Cambridge College courtyard? The Bursar gave us a budget of £50 for the year. I knew nothing but was immensely keen. The borders were revamped, the roses pruned, the lawn kept formal, a wild garden developed under the little orchard – ahead of its time – and the top bed

completely overhauled. Pride of place went to a Magnolia on which I had lavished the princely sum of £7 out of the budget. Imagine my shock when, come the autumn, this magnificent specimen and key planting shed all its leaves. I hurried back to the garden shop and explained. The kindly old gent on the counter took a long hard look at and asked, 'Have you everheard the word deciduous , sir?'

That's how ignorant I was. The long end of the story is that I am now much wiser, have done innumerable gardens and the Magnolia is still the crowning glory of the Courtyard. The fascination with gardening is still there. The lessons of the garden I have employed throughout my ministry. I always advise young clergy setting out on their parishes as priests that there are, in my experience, two basic approaches to parish life. That of the doll's house or the garden.

The priest who comes in and immediately wants the parish to be in his image and taste will run around configuring everything to his predetermined plan and predelictions. This means, usually, that he gets round him a fan club of those who like that sort of thing.

The alternate method is that of the gardener. A good gardener, when he takes over a plot, will clear the obvious weeds and tidy the whole show. BUT he will also, whatI call, see a season round. This means that, having familiarised himself with the soil, the landscape, the fruitfulness, the productivity, the floriferousness, he will be able to see what is truly dead wood – and not a glorious magnolia in winter – ascertain what

needs pruning, what is a good plant in the wrong place which needs moving, what is missing, what could be planted, what will keep the garden full of beauty throughout the year etc.

This, in my experience, is the better option by far. And one which is more easily understood by the people who have been put in this garden to flower and be fruitful.

The other wonderful mystery, as Jesus points out, is the life of the seed. After many years I recognise different seeds but, from just looking at them you would never know the glory locked within, simply awaiting the right conditions to come to life and blossom. A pea is a pea is a pea....but would you ever suspect that the little pear shaped white and brown striped nutty seed, looking like a refugee from your breakfast, held within it an eight-foot standard of dazzling sunflower? Or the curious seven bumped brown widget would yield a six foot glory that produces Indian ink? None of them, of course, remain anything but seeds, little dark insignificant bits of dust. Untilthey are planted, watered , kept warm and are in the hands of the patient gardener.

Nor may we assume that it is a comfortable process – that of becoming. First of all, the seed is put into the darkness. Then, according to the Head Gardener, Jesus, it must die to what it was to become what it is intended to be. This is not a comfortable process. But then, having been broken open and begun to grow, still nothing appears on the surface of the soil. For this is the key time of developing and putting down roots. The stronger the root the more substantial and sustainable the future. Only when that foundation is secure does the stalk and first two leaves break

the surface. (Watch a runner bean – it is bent in an attitude of prayer as its shoulders first breast the soil.)

Only when strong enough does the plantsman 'prick out' the seedlings and place them where they can thrive and flower. Care, water of life, nurture, warmth, protection, timing, attention all converge on the little mystery of the seed of self - becoming, in the hands of the gardener, what we are intended to be.

From the feathery frivolity of the startling blue nigella to the ancient canopy of the mighty oak, it all starts the same way. And like them , we are to blossom where we are planted and, for whatever length of season we are allotted on this earth, give glory to God.