

Sermon – Sunday 15th July 2018 – 9.30 am

I have two favourite kinds of garden. The first is gardens like Wisley or some of the lovely National Trust gardens, where someone else does the hard work and I can enjoy the results. The second is watching Gardener's World on the television. I don't do it very often, but I marvel at the passion shown for plants and cultivation, the variety of interests of the presenters, and the wealth of advice on offer – all from the comfort of my armchair.

Last year I particularly enjoyed watching Gardener's World live. During the season of flower shows, BBC Gardener's World have their own event at the NEC in Birmingham, complete with show gardens. Last year, in celebration of their 50th anniversary, someone had put together a series of gardens tracing the changing faces of Britain's gardens over the decades. Do you remember, for example, those patterned breeze blocks that were very popular for a while? It seemed that no garden wall was complete without them, yet they aren't seen much now. Or how in the 1980s the Ground Force programme sent every gardener to the timber yard to put up some decking Tommy Walsh style? Personally I have a soft spot for the wilder look in gardens – times when there has been an appreciation for wild flowers, and those which attract birds and insects. Of course some would say that's because I'm no gardener, but there is something fascinating about the way fashions and trends even have an impact on our gardening habits.

What I also love, though, is the way that, no matter what the fashion, plants have their ways of scuppering our best laid plans. Sometimes it's partly our own ignorance. I had a very unhappy year when I decided to prune my magnolia bush after the buds for the following year had already been formed. No flowers that year. But the rebel in me just loves it when someone has carefully colour-coded their border – but there is a rogue red plant among the white.

I don't know what your garden looks like at the moment, but I imagine most of us have parched lawns. But in my lawn there are still weeds that seem to survive relentlessly. I marvel at their glorious yellow flowers, standing out amid the desert landscape. And in my borders, where everything else is on a struggle for survival, the brambles are still growing at a rate of knots, sending forth branch after branch to catch me unawares. And now I can't even decide whether I should cut them back because there are the signs of the blackberries to come.

The thing is, plants simply don't understand our plans for them. The bramble doesn't realise that it's a weed and I don't want it in my border. The yellow daisy-like flower has no idea that it's not supposed to be in the middle of my lawn. There is something quite wonderful about their pride in blazing into flower in the most inappropriate place, gloriously unaware that it doesn't fit into our plans.

I sometimes wonder whether our gardens can teach us some important lessons. It is extraordinary the beauty of some gardens – the wonderful ways in which people put plants together, nurture and tend them. And of course for the keen vegetable growers, the fruits of our labour are not just in something aesthetically pleasing, but also in delicious, nutritious produce.

But no matter how good a gardener we are, we are not entirely in control. We can fertilise our soil, but if it is acid, it is unlikely to become alkali – and the plants that thrive will reflect that. Some years we think we have done all the right things, but still there are plants that don't flourish as we might hope; pesky weeds that flourish all too well; weather conditions that hamper our best efforts.

Jesus used plant imagery because it made sense to the people he was speaking to, and it can still make sense to us today. In this morning's gospel reading, the overwhelming message is one of love and our connectedness to God. I love that phrase: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love."

Think again about your own garden, or one you know well. And now allow yourself to wonder how God might see it. How God's love can encompass the weeds; the plants in the wrong place; the ones that are struggling a bit in this year's drought. The reason I love the way the brambles encroach in my borders is because somehow it makes me believe that they know that they are loved even though they might not be where I want them. It's as though they have a confidence to be who they are that is independent of my opinion. Like they know God's love and acceptance of them in a way that I often find hard to believe for myself.

Children can be a gift to us in a similar way. How much more ready are we to look at children with eyes brimming with love than to believe that we are seen in that way too? The way that you look at Polly – the pleasure you take in her smiles; the joy of her emerging personality. Can you really believe that you are loved like that, too?

When Jesus talks about being the vine and us the branches, he is speaking of the most important aspect of our identity – our connectedness with God. There are so many things that can concern us in bringing up children – at this age it's all about percentiles of growth, sitting up, crawling. But before long it'll be schools, friendships, dare I say boyfriends. You get the picture. And I know my own parents would say that the worrying never stops.

But today you are doing something very special and very important. Today you are acknowledging Polly's identity as God's child, known and loved by God. As one of the branches connected to the true vine. And as she grows up, that will never stop being important.

We none of us know the path life holds for us – and you don't know the path it holds for Polly. You know there will be plenty of ups and downs along the way, and you know how much you would give for the ups to outweigh the downs. Nothing that happens in Polly's life can separate her from God's love – just as none of us are separated from that love.

Sometimes it's dangerous to take analogies too far, and I certainly wouldn't want anyone to go away with the impression that Polly can be compared to the plants in our gardens, let alone the weeds. But what I do hope and pray is that she can live out all that it is she was created to be, knowing that God loves her for who she is. Parents and Godparents are such an important part in that – you are the ones who will pick her up when she is down and remind her how precious she is, as well as celebrating her many successes.

There is so much in life that we cannot control, but God's call is to rest in the knowledge that we are loved and cherished. Polly and each one of us.

Amen