In last week’s sermon Reverend Mike spoke on the subject of “Why am I a Christian?”. Despite scurrilous allegations made by Mike that I might have been enjoying a pint in the pub last Sunday morning, you’ll be pleased to hear that I was in fact watching the service on the livestream from home. I had even showered and got dressed!

Like Mike I have not had any Road to Damascus moment when God has revealed himself to me. No flash of lightning or roar of thunder. I came to faith relatively late in life, I was 26 when I was confirmed and up to the age of 25 felt no appetite or desire to be part of the Christian club. That’s not to say that I hadn’t encountered Christians – I met them in St Marys Eastham in my primary school years and at St Andrews in my teenage years when my parents persuaded me much against my will to join them there.

At University my best friend was a Christian, and her boyfriend, and their friends, and Colette’s room mate, and in our second and third years we all lived in the same shared houses. Still nothing.

To be honest I only really started coming to church regularly to humour Colette – she wanted to get married in a church you see and I figured that as it meant nothing to me it was best to just go along with the idea.

But some seed must have been planted at some point, when precisely I can’t tell you, and that seed must have started to grow and develop along the way.

What I know to be true is that I am a better person for having a Christian faith. Not perfect – not by a million miles – but certainly a better person. Still occasionally short tempered, still occasionally selfish, still occasionally envious, still occasionally anxious. But, still a better person.

Christ Church is the family I have chosen for myself – not the family I was born into not that there is that much wrong with them. **Hi Dad!**  I can’t change my height, or my hair colour, I can’t change the bags under my eyes or my big nose – all these things are in my DNA. But what I choose for myself is this Church.

I come to this Church to be part of this community of faith which inspires me, which loves me and which supports me. This Church helps me put on the armour of Christ so that I can face the world with renewed hope and confidence.

This week’s Gospel speaks of beginnings. Less about the “**Why?**” and more about the “**How and when** does one become a Christian?”. But maybe in looking at the “how and when” we learn more about the “why?”

Today’s reading speaks of seed being sown and the ground conditions that determine how well that seed grows.

In each scenario in the parable the soils are different – ground that has been beaten down, ground that is rocky, ground that is affected by weeds.

If the seed falls on the ground that has been beaten down so much as to be hard ground, then the chance to penetrate the earth is really slim and because the seeds never enter the fertile ground they fail to germinate.

If the ground is stony and shallow then the seed may germinate rapidly, because the soil gets warm quickly in the sunshine. But with no depth, the plants cannot grow deep roots and therefore cannot search out the moisture in the ground. Without such nourishment the plant will wither and die.

Many at the time followed Jesus for the spectacle. They were interested to be part of the drama of the healings, the revivings, of the feedings, the miracles. They followed him because he entertained them, but ultimately they were not to be disciples, their interest was shallow and superficial.

There’s a challenge to the Church in modern times too – some in society who are conditioned by the abundance of immediate entertainment, disposable “fast” fashion, and the next day delivery of Amazon Prime simply doesn’t get what Church is about.

Some folk just don’t want to be part of an organisation where the rewards are not immediately attainable, where the benefits cannot be immediately enjoyed.

Yet Christians are called to believe and serve selflessly – even when, or rather, most often when we aren’t receiving anything in return.

We are called to carry on in faithful service when circumstances appear desperate and there are forces opposing us, when hope is fading and the storm is all around us. That kind of faith needs the deep roots of a relationship with God.

Some ground appears fertile but circumstances are such that the ground is not only fertile for the good seeds, but is fertile for the bad seeds too.

From this ground grow good plants but also weeds, and the weeds grow stronger and faster than the good seed and ultimately overwhelm the good plants. The land becomes untidy and unkempt – much like the Vicar’s lockdown hair and beard!

In a crowded world, there are plenty of competing interests, and not all of them are positive. We can become distracted from what is really good in our lives.

Lockdown has allowed us space and time to re-evaluate our priorities, and given us an opportunity to reflect on just how little we need to be truly content.

Weeding out the distractions throws into sharp focus the things we really value – friendship, companionship, fellowship, family, community.

Planted in good soil the harvest can be plentiful – multiple times over the seed reproduces fruit. From one seed so much can grow. This is the kind of growth God wants.

Jesus explains the parable on the basis of us getting our relationship with God on the right footing – this is the good soil in which the seed of faith can grow.

But what about another angle that occurred to me when I read the parable this week – what about us as the sower, faithfully proclaiming the Good News message?

Maybe it is not for us to know the soil into which the seed will land – it is not for us to expect that our efforts to spread the good news will always be well received or will quickly bear fruit. Only God’s will shall determine whether the seed takes root and establishes itself and grows and blossoms.

I’d like to think that the recent positive experiences of our Boulders in the Youth Alpha course was due in some small part to the input of Colette and I.

But in truth, on reflection, we merely facilitated the sessions. We were a conduit, a platform. Actually what was at work was God himself, the love of Jesus, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

In all honesty we just didn’t know how Youth Alpha would go – it was largely an experiment as this Church had never run a Youth Alpha course before – let alone one during a period of social distancing and via the miracle that is Zoom!

Some weeks we started sessions genuinely nervous about what was going to happen only to find the Boulders engaged enthusiastically with the subject matter and the session ran over time. The Holy Spirit was at work.

Other times we ended a tough session, looked at each other, puffed our cheeks and said “let’s put the kettle on”. After reflection we concluded that if it was God’s will for the message to land and take hold, then it would.

We sowed the seed without really knowing how fertile the ground was or where the seed would fall. Through patient study, exploration, interrogation, and prayer they now – we hope – have a better understanding of what God could mean to them – what part God could play in their lives and the love God has for them whatever they may decide to do next.

Our start as Christians is really important, notwithstanding that, for some like me, we might never fully understand when and how that faith began.

In Ephesians 1: 11 Paul says,

*“Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, God had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, had plans to make us part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone”.*

This past Tuesday marked the last formal Youth Alpha session and we ended by praying for the teenage participants that they may find freedom in their faith to be authentic – to be the best version of themselves that they can be. We prayed that they may be encouraged by the Youth Alpha course to become deeply rooted in a relationship of love with God and that their journey of faith would be an adventure and that they would enjoy life in all its fullness and glory.

We can still sow – maybe that is all we can do - trusting that God knows the right time and the right place for every seed to germinate – that God will create the right environment for the seed to grow – potentially using us to fertilise the soil and to add support where it is needed.

We trust that God has a plan for every seed – the good ones and the bad – and when eventually such seeds blossom and reveal their beauty we shall celebrate together God’s providence and the fruits of God’s patient and faithful gardening.

Amen