This is a sermon about the church. I want to begin with the question of what is a church. This might seem a simple question but it’s a question which has been given many answers. There are volumes written on the subject of ecclesiology, which is the theologians’ word for thinking about churches – following the good theological practice that you should never use a simple word which everyone understands if you can find a long and incomprehensible alternative.

The problem lying behind the lengthy discussions about the meaning and purpose of the church is that Jesus, in the New Testament, invited a group of friends to travel with him, and went around with them. We, by contrast, are members of a large, complex, wealthy organisation, with buildings, businesses, works of art. How did we get from a group of friends on the roads of Galilee to the large modern Church of England, part of an even larger organisation of worldwide churches? And what is the connecting link which binds them together and gives them a shared identity?

There are many possible answers to what is the true identity and nature of the church.

A colleague who I worked with some years ago liked to say that ‘the church is what’s left when the building burns down’. He was thinking about communities, and showing that a church is not a building but a group of people who are formed and sustained by a shared faith.

The apostle Paul in his epistles used to say that the church ‘is the body of Christ’. Here the emphasis is on action and activity. Christ came to do certain things. He ministered and cared for the people he met and helped them to find salvation and fullness of life. It’s the task and calling of the church to carry on this work. The church is Christ’s body, doing what he did in his time, but for people in our time. When I’m taking confirmation classes I usually have a session on the church, and we write down all the different things that Jesus did, and then we see which of these the church does best and whether there are any of them which it fails to do. Its’ always a thought-provoking exercise, and helps us to understand the work of the church better.
Another approach is suggested by the teaching of Jesus. He often used the example of things growing. There is a series of his stories about plants and growth. He tells of a sower planting his fields in spring, and the techniques, or lack of them, which he uses to achieve varying results – and there’s a farmer wondering what to do about an infestation of weeds – and there’s a story of a plant which starts as a tiny seed but which then grows to huge size. My favourite illustration is the simplest. It’s the story which was read as our gospel. It is simply about growth. It reminds us that seeds grow and turn into plants, with small beginnings, unexpected possibilities, the influences from outside which aid the growing process, and striking results. If we start here then the church is a place or a setting in which a variety of things happen, grow and flourish.

I was thinking about this last week at our parish quiet day at Clare Priory. Several of us had gone away for a day of reflection and prayer at Clare Priory on the borders of Suffolk and Essex. It’s a medieval priory which was destroyed under Henry VIII and has now been returned to the ownership of the brothers of the order. I enjoyed the talks which took place through the day, and the time together, but what really struck me was the gardens. Clare Priory is surrounded by beautiful gardens, planted around the old walls, with a wild natural feel to it, with lawns and borders, trees and shrubs. The early autumn colours gave the plants light and shade, and there were still many of the plants in bloom. I walked from plant to plant just looking, and at the end of each talk hurried back to soak up the colour, the smells, and the sights of the garden.

Here is a way of thinking about the church. It’s about things growing. There is a variety and profusion of flowers and plants, each growing in its own way, each has its own fulfilment and beauty. The church is the activity of the spirit of God, working on us and through us, giving growth and fulfilment. The church is like a garden, which we can enjoy, which constantly shows us new aspects of the glory of God manifested through his people.

In Jesus’ stories about growing there seem to be key moments in the process. There are turning points when the long process of growth comes to a conclusion and the plant brings forth its fruit. Sowing leads to growing leads to flowering. This is the harvest.

This is Harvest Festival month. It’s a time when we think of things growing. If these plants are Jesus’ illustration of what happens when God’s spirit is active, then we need to ask what kinds of things we should be looking for to show us how God’s spirit is at work.

For us as a church it’s been a good harvest festival month in many ways. We’ve had our harvest moments. We’ve dedicated and installed a statue of the Virgin Mary and child. There’s a long story behind this moment, starting when the local sculptor Douglas Jeal, who had tragically been diagnosed with motor neurone disease, discussed
an auction of his drawings to raise funds for Arthur Rank House. We did this, and he later, after his death a few months later, gave us this statue. It took time to receive it, strengthen it so it could survive the rigours of public exhibition here, and then find and arrange the perspex case and stand. But now it's out in church and I'm delighted that so many people are as moved by it as I am. Its display after much preparation is a harvest moment.

Then after a summer of dormant inactivity, our children’s events are now re-starting and blooming again. It’s a truly uplifting experience to welcome the children back to the Ark, to children’s church, to the school and the choirs.

We’ve been meeting with people of other faiths to decide how we can work together and whether we can set up a new form of chaplaincy for the university.

All these belong in the church. We can share in them and take part in them. My suggestion today is that our church can be compared to that garden, with things to look at, to admire and to enjoy. See life in church as a walk around the garden, always with the capacity to surprise. Above all – enjoy it.

The church likes to emphasise special moments. We call them sacraments, and are these moments which sum up, make sense of, and strengthen what are lengthy processes. We learn slowly and gradually about faith – but there often comes a key moment of conversion. A relationship between two people starts, grows gradually as they get to know each other better, and bit by bit matures. But there comes a moment when a couple may decide to get married. This one moment doesn’t form or create the relationship – that’s already there. But it’s important and summarises what’s been going on and somehow expresses and affirms it.

We need to be able to recognise these harvest moments, when patient preparation suddenly bursts into fulfilment. We need to recognise and respond.

I’m convinced that this autumn is one such moment for us. We are back after summer holidays; we have arranged a further year’s funding for our heritage education officer; we are submitting a new proposal for chaplaincy to the university in the course of the autumn; and we are also seeking money for a faith and arts pioneer minister at Michaelhouse.

Let's make it a good harvest.