

PHILIPPIANS 1:1-11  
CORE TASK #2 – NURTURE

A plant that grows – it begins life as a seed or a bulb, it is sown or planted into the ground and grows and grows and keeps growing until it bears fruit, or becomes a tree in which birds come to nest; there is a whole lot of creative energy going into the plant as it grows; it is not staying still for a moment. People on a journey, following the leader, but it's not a game; it is their life's work in a sense, always on the move, always going where the leader goes, never stopping, never staying in one place for very long. A building site – it is a messy place and there's a few of them around the city at the moment; they tend to be muddy places and out of the mess and the mud, the building is being created, put together, and it is a place of hard work and energy to create something worthwhile. People – beginning life as babies and growing into children and growing and growing till become more mature adults and finally into the wisdom of old age.

These are some of the pictures that the Bible uses to describe the Christian. These are some of the pictures that the Bible uses to describe the Church. What do they all have in common? They are all pictures of growth and movement and development. None of these pictures is static, none is still for a moment; none is the finished article. Even when the Bible talks about the Church as a building, and the bricks being put together, it is the process of building, not the fact that people are complete. Let me ask you this: how has your faith grown in the last 12 months? How have you become more mature as a person in the last 12 months? How have your relationships with other people become better in the last 12 months? These questions make an assumption: that faith has grown, that we are more mature, that we do nurture our relationships. Or is your faith exactly the same today as 5, 10 years ago? You have no more understanding? Faith is no stronger? Are we same person today as 5 years ago? You get the point? We should be Christians who grow and develop, but so often we're parked in the lay-by, stuck, the same today as when we started.

Last week, we began to take a look at the 5 Core Tasks of Church that we identified in 2001 as important for us as a church in Juniper Green. These are Worship, Nurture, Service, Mission and Prayer. Last week, we looked at worship and the sermon is on the website under the heading of Psalm 96. We saw that worship is something we offer to God, something in which we all participate and is much bigger than simply attending services in the Church building. Today, we look at the second of these Core Tasks, Nurture. We have a Nurture Team that has a remit for creating opportunities for discussion and people being together to grow in faith; it arranges events like the Men's breakfast; it provides material such as Bible Reading Notes; it looks after the library with books and music to stimulate faith and understanding. We also have Church Wednesday, a time for prayer and bible study together. These are not done because they are Church things to do and we have to tick a box to make sure we do them; we do these to provide opportunities for us to grow in our faith, to nurture faith, to grow in other ways too.

Philippians 1:1-11 helps us see what one Church leader thought about a Church that was on his heart. Paul writes to the Church at Philippi to help them, to encourage them, to pray for them. Philippi was a bit like Rome-in-miniature; it was a Roman colony, full of ex-soldiers who had been given land there when they left the army. It was also the first Church in Europe according to Acts 16 and Paul had been there several times as part of his missionary journeys. He had the privilege of being there almost at the birth of the Church in Philippi and each time he visited he must have seen it grow and change, but he has more to say and they have more to learn.

God doesn't stay still. That's the first insight that Paul offers us here in his letter. God is always at work: "*Being confident...*" (1:6) The beginning of the Church in Philippi was a lady called Lydia, a draper selling cloth in the market-place; then there was an ex-soldier who ran the city jail and in whose jail he held Paul and Silas for one night. This was the work that God began in Philippi and it was still going on. The beginning of the Christians' faith was hearing the stories of Jesus and they were intrigued perhaps by what they heard: "He is a fascinating character this Jesus; there might be something in this message these Christians are telling me!" So people came to Christian faith in Philippi and God began a good work in their hearts and minds and that work was still going on. God was still at work in the Church at Philippi, adding new people; God was still at work in individuals, stretching their faith, challenging them, encouraging them, strengthening them. God began a work there, and He hadn't finished it. God never still; always on move. When Paul writes, they are a work in progress!

Always, the place to start to understand ourselves or to understand the Church is to understand what God is like. God is at work, on the move; so we should be a Church, Christians, who are looking to grow. God has begun a work in the Church here: we may have to go back centuries to trace the beginning of the work God was doing in Edinburgh, in this community, in the congregations that now make up Juniper Green Parish Church and God hasn't finished; He is still at work in our Church; His work is not complete. God has begun a work in our lives: it began when someone told us the stories of Jesus, in Sunday School, or at work, or somewhere else and we were intrigued by Jesus and came to believe and faith was planted as a seed in our hearts and that faith began to grow, we got to know more about Jesus and our faith became stronger and deeper and more mature and that is still happening and God is still at work in us. We – the Church, individuals – are a work in progress!

Paul's prayer offers us three areas of life that we ought to nurture, areas in which we should be growing and developing.

**1. relationships** – "*This is...*" (1:9) Churches with an evangelical background like ours tend to be strong on getting right our relationship with God; we know that we need to get that right and so we concentrate on making ourselves aware of the importance of that relationship; it is right to do so. But we have tended to neglect getting right our relationships with one another. We need to nurture personal relationships with one another; we underestimate the importance of that at our peril! Love should abound more and more in the Church; Christians should grow in our love for one another. But it is one of the hardest things we do. At our best, we love and care for one another well; we support one another, we bear one another burdens; we pray for one another. At our worst, we bicker and quarrel, we fall out with one another, are nosey and we gossip, we snap at one another. In a big Church like ours, there is also the danger that we simply ignore people other than our friends, so that there are people whose names we don't even know and make no effort to find out. We need to nurture our relationships with one another – come to coffee, take the opportunities on offer to meet people in places other than Sunday morning, to talk, to get to know one another, to develop our love for one another, so that love abound more and more.

**2. maturity** – this is about you as a person; about me as a person. "*So that...*" (v10) Children are children and behave like children. Then we see adults who behave like children, as if they've never really grown up. It is parents' delight to see their children grow and mature and then as adults deal with life in an adult and mature way. Our goal as Christians is to become more and more like Christ, to learn to be like Him a little bit more each day. This is about 'character', about traits, qualities, good points; the Christian should be growing a good Christian character, modelled on and shaped

by Jesus. Our aim is to be pure and blameless in life and none of us is that; we are a work in progress; sometimes we use that as an excuse – “You can’t expect me to be perfect!” and that becomes an excuse for some wayward behaviour. Be a work in progress, but there must be progress. Let’s not live and behave like children, but grow to be more and more mature, Christ-like people.

**3. faith** – *“filled with...” (v11)* Righteousness is one of these Christian words that can mean a lot of things; it can mean behaving in the right kind of way; it can also mean the gift that God has given to us in Jesus, that we are made righteous people in His eyes. In other words, this is to do with our relationship with God – ‘filled with fruit of righteousness’ is about nurturing our faith and growing in our understanding of what God has done for us in Christ. It is good for us to nurture our faith, to let our faith grow; to have a deeper understanding of what God is like and what God has done is good for us; it makes us stronger Christians, more confident in our faith, more able to deal with all that life can throw at us at times.

It is good for us, indeed essential for us, to nurture our relationships with one another in love, to nurture our character by becoming more mature Christians, to nurture our faith in relationship with God. None of this happens automatically: there was a person in my previous Church who professed faith as an adult and joined the Church, but she never really embraced that in any active way and didn’t come to Church very often. Later she complained to a friend that her faith was no different five years later than the day she joined the church to which her friend and wise stalwart of the Church said it was no surprise to her since she had made no effort to nurture her faith! Growing doesn’t happen automatically! We nurture our relationships when we talk to one another over coffee, or when we do things together, either as social events or worship, pray, study together. We nurture our character and our faith by reading the Bible, by coming to Church and listening to the preaching and taking it to heart, by praying about what we read and hear and then putting it into practice. So we learn about ourselves, what kind of people we should be; so we learn about God and what He is like, so that our faith can be stretched, challenged, deepened, strengthened.

Our calling as Christians is to grow! The plant growing and producing fruit, the building site being turned into a building, the people on a journey facing new experiences – these are the pictures the Bible uses. We are a people called to grow, and develop, so don’t sit back in the lay-by and think you are the finished article. God is not finished yet; He continues to do the work He has begun and we are called to grow, develop, build. Make every effort to nurture your relationships with one another, to nurture Christian character in yourself, to nurture faith – this is for your good, for the Church’s benefit, and ultimately for the glory of God.