



'Bear fruit, fruit that will last' John 15 v16

The image of the tree bearing fruit is a timeless and universal image of flourishing and abundance and is also one that features centrally in Biblical analogy and parables. We see the tree as the Church, rooted and planted in God's Word and in God's very presence around us. To be planted in the earth is to partner with God in mission; it is to co-operate with His will for his Church and His people.

We use this image for two reasons.

1. It helps us see what a flourishing church looks like - it provides vision and aspiration. What fruits are we waiting to ripen and which are we nurturing into life. All 9 fruits are important to a flourishing, healthy church, and all have a relationship with one another. This image gives us a vision of a fruitful church, growing purposefully and bearing Kingdom shaped fruit.
2. The image can also be used as a tool to discern where churches need to focus their efforts and energies, as (contrary to nature) each fruit can be in a different season.

Below is a description of each season, using a particular fruit as a worked example. Each season has particular characteristics and 'feel'. Identifying which season a fruit is in requires discernment, instinct, an openness and the shared discernment of your ministry team or PCC. It is important not to consider each fruit in comparison to a 'rosy past' but to consider them as working together to realise God's vision for your church and community. It is not a simple 'is this better or worse' that what went before, it is reflection tool to help you work on God's vision and make plans and changes to fulfil His call.

Spring - Green; full of promise and potential, perhaps a bit fragile as it either ripens into summer or shrivels back to winter.

For example - '*Profound Worship*': Perhaps a worship audit has been conducted and changes discerned and planned for. This would be spring-like promise and potential. The changes could go well and tip into pink summer and full flourishing as worship is enriched by the changes and people are moved by their experiences. Or, changes could divide a

congregation resulting in conflict and being shelved; this could tip into grey winter as the plans lie dormant.

Summer - Pink; ripe full, sweet fruit. The fragility to this season is keeping it ripe, continuing to nourish and feed the fruit and not assume it is a 'job done' and take your eyes and mind away from it.

For example - '*Empowering Laity and Shared Leadership*': Maybe you have recently restructured your 'Ministry Team' and good useful meetings are had with regularity. You have co-workers in the Gospel you trust and respect; they may be your wardens, readers, lay leaders or worship, treasurers or youth workers, etc. You share leadership and are creative in your thinking and faithful in your praying together. This fruitful summer season needs maintenance to continue: it may overripen whereby you take each other for granted, meetings become less fresh and attendance begins to vary.

Autumn - Orange; overripe, tired, past it's best. This season usually creeps up slowly and when we are not alert to it.

For example - '*Engaging Youth and Children's work*': you have a thriving toddler group, Messy Church and Youth Group. They have been sustainable for a long time and new generations have passed through them. But, some leaders have got tired, and some want to step back from this work: maybe one or two have left already. A new group of leaders does not look forthcoming; parents are busy working and know they cannot fulfil the roles as they had been previously fulfilled - the legacy of the 'hey day' of this group weighs heavy. A new generation feel burdened by the past and not inspired by it. The prayer here is to flip to a green spring - to find new potential and fresh ideas. To discover and nurture vocations to these roles, to imagine them in ways that time poor people can contribute to and make their own. Maybe roles need 'trimming' and sharing, maybe it is good to look for the 'surprising' or less obvious new leader? The danger is further tiredness and over-ripeness which slips into winter and a dormant season as the group deteriorates further. Being alive to this threat and nurturing new leaders is key as a summer slips to autumn. Autumn is also a time for pruning - is this a consideration when you have identified this season?

Winter - Grey; Lifeless and dormant, fruitless. This is perhaps the most obvious season, and the most easily recognised.

For example - '*Courageous Community Outreach*': Your church used to be involved in community events; collecting for the foodbank, invited to lead prayers at the community carol singing event, etc. maybe you offered your space to house the post office when it closed, or maybe you ran a 'good neighbours scheme'. But over time volunteers to do these things moved away or stepped back; they had got tired and no one stepped forward in

their place. The outreach staggered on for a while but wasn't sustainable so stopped. No other initiatives rose up to engage with the community; the church and town felt separate. The church felt closed and newcomers never stayed; the church community shrank. The challenge here is to breathe new life into the community; how to move to spring green and begin again, maybe using winter as dormant and not dead. A rest period before new life is born - but also to adequately assess the length of rest needed, so new life doesn't become a far-off fantasy.