Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.

We are marking Rogationtide, traditionally the days immediately before the Feast of the Ascension, when the church focussed on the work of the land.

I was watching a tractor in the field next to the vicarage. One of the joys of living where we do is that the kitchen window looks out over the field. When we arrived it was full of turnips, then it was full of sheep, then all the turnips disappeared. Then the sheep went and the muck spreader arrived, followed by the plough, then the harrow.

A new crop, a harvest, then the plough again. The land is always busy. The farmer’s work is never done. This year something new. A subsoiler plough, breaking up the hard pan where last year’s tractor compacted the soil. The plough followed, and a few days later the harrow.

It struck me these are images rich with significance for how life feels at the moment. People speak of a harrowing experience. It usually means something difficult and unpleasant. Something that shakes us, possibly something that breaks us.

As I watched those two tractors criss-crossing the field I had a sense of this is how things feel right now. Like the ploughed earth our lives have been overturned. This year it feels like the overturning has been deep, and things we thought we solid and fixed have been cut through and broken up.

Then comes the harrowing. In the old creeds people spoke of the crucified Christ descending to the dead. Holy Saturday, the day between the Good Friday and Easter Sunday, marks the time when Christ was dead. In the old traditions it was called the Harrowing of Hell, when God breaks the power of death.

The harrow breaks up. And we find a curious new significance, that this word which we avoid, because harrowing experiences are painful, is also the word for the preparation of ground for the planting of new seeds. It is only when the ground has been harrowed that new life begins.

I suspect many people have a sense of lives being deeply overturned and life being broken. I know there are many people who are finding it difficult to reconnect with what went before. People who used to be sociable and enjoy the company of others are struggling to find any enthusiasm to take up what they have lost. People who used to do things actively have a sense of diminished confidence. People who were proactive and determined say they have just lost their spark.

The first thing – the first thing is to accept this for what it is. In the land that is overturned and harrowed, in this season of Rogationtide, we get a sense of how things are. A facing of facts, an understanding of how we feel and what we experience, and also that curious new significance – that it is the overturned and harrowed land which is ready for new planting.

Jesus said, Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.

We might prefer it not to be pruned. But God has other plans. The hallmark of life, and the judgement of life, are the fruits we bear. It is as the parable of the talents, to those who have been given gifts much will be expected. The servant who hid his talent in the ground had it taken from him.

It doesn’t mean that we all have to do things that will make the headlines. God isn’t looking for heroes. As Edward Kings said, what we need are a few quiet saints. A course I used a few years ago began with the story of Peter, who after 25 years in the same place retired to a town he didn’t know. He was lost. No friends, no connections, no church, no job. What was he to do with his time? In a sense Peter’s life had been ploughed up and harrowed. Like a field, his life was made empty. It is in the emptiness God makes new beginnings. That is a phrase I keep coming back to – God acts in the empty spaces.

Peter prayed. He took a risk and asked God, what do you want me to do? Which is a dangerous prayer because you never know what the answer might be.

And in his prayer a verse from Jeremiah came to mind – Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile.

So what does that mean?

Well Peter liked to go for a morning walk through a local park. On his next walk he stopped and looked around. It was a nice park, it had once been neat and tidy, with flowerbeds and a bandstand. Sadly these days it was a bit of a mess. There was litter everywhere.

So Peter went to Screwfix and bought a litter picker and a roll of bin bags, and he started picking up litter. And nobody noticed, at first. But after a few days people began to notice, and a couple of them stopped and chatted to him, and then a few more, and people asked him why he was doing it. And Peter told them it was God’s answer to his prayer.

Sometimes it takes our lives to be deeply overturned for us to hear God’s voice. Sometimes it is in the painful moments of harrowing that new beginnings emerge. Sometimes it is when we do not know what to do that we are closest to bearing fruit.

We may thing we come to church to be comforted. If so remember what Jesus said, Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You may be here this morning because God is pruning you, making you ready to do something more, be something more.

If life is like that, if you feel overturned, harrowed, pruned, remember what Jesus said. It is those who bear fruit who God turns to. Your challenge may be a sign God sees in you a branch that bears good fruit.