

“A farmer went out to sow his seed...”

Luke 8:5

They can be like a sun, words.
They can do for the heart
what light can
for a field.

Daniel Ladinsky (after St John of the Cross)

The seed is in the ground.
Now we may rest in hope
While darkness does its work.

Wendell Berry

PART ONE TRANSCRIPT

Earth

“We, too, need grounding.”

Alastair McIntosh, *Soil and Soul*

The Parable of the Sower is one of the best known of Jesus’ stories. Unlike many of the other parables, we’re even given an explanation of what it means, which makes it easy to regard it as done and dusted, rather than something which might yield further wisdom. But looking at it with fresh eyes does bring a few surprises, one of the first being that it devotes most of its time to talking about soil.

In previous encounters with this parable, I was usually busy being relieved that I was the good soil, and not the soil which is covered in rocks, or full of weeds, or on the hard compacted path where the seed could be snatched away by birds. Or perhaps worrying that I might not be good enough after all. But I read an article which opened it up for me in a new way.

David Roberts writes: “Truth be told, I’ve been each of these types of soils in the past three days, maybe even the past three hours. I’ve been that hardened path and lost my faith in God. I’ve been that rocky soil that lacks depth and withers away under pressure, I’ve been that worrisome, thorn-choked soil. We all have these kinds of soils inside us all at the same time.” (www.patheos.com)

And then I took another look at soil, which, it turns out, is pretty marvellous stuff. It’s full of life, in fact, science continues to reveal just how full of life it is. It has its own life cycle, and plays an enormously important part in the life cycles of other living things. If we cared for it as we should, it would have a significant impact on the future of the planet.

Soil has a theological meaning, too. For centuries, we have worked with a concept of God and of the world which was essentially medieval, a three-tier hierarchy, with God in heaven above, the earth in the middle, and hell below. Recent theology places God on the earth with us, the creator in the creation, in

the words of theologian Paul Tillich, “the ground of all being”. The rock on which stand, the ground in which we grow.

Take a few minutes now to be still. Turn your focus inward and let the noise of the world recede, leaving you in quietness. If you find distractions popping into your mind as you sit, be gentle with yourself and gently push them away, they’ll still be there later if you want to come back to them. Be still, now, let your heart become quiet.

Focus on your breathing, without changing it, simply tune in to it. Notice its gentle rhythm. Notice where you feel it in your body. Can you feel your heart beating in the quietness, perhaps placing a hand over your heart, feeling that connection to life, how ordinary and yet how surprising it is. Notice how - or where - you feel that heartbeat, and know that every heartbeat is unique, like a fingerprint. A unique sign of God’s ongoing creation of me.

Think for a moment about your feet resting on the floor. Focus your attention for a moment on the soles of your feet. Notice that physical sensation of the ground underneath you, how it anchors you, grounds you. We don’t tend to think about the ground very much. After all, it’s always been there. You might gently ask yourself, what is my solid ground? What helps keep me grounded?

In a moment, I’ll invite you to consider the various kinds of ground in this story, and to think about the kinds of ground in your own heart. Remember that we might have many types of ground in us, on any given day. Bring compassion to yourself as you look. Ask for the grace that you might be able to do this without judgment, because the Sower does not judge, the Sower casts the seed on all types of soil. In the words of Macrina Wiederkehr: “The Sower believes in the land of your heart and wants to be intimately involved in the daily dusty ordinariness of your life.”

Luke 8: 4-8

While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable: ‘A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered

because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.

Four types of soil are mentioned in the parable.

There is the soil along the path, which is trampled down, hard-packed. It isn't open to receive the seed. Perhaps there are times when we feel trampled, beaten down, less able to open ourselves to receive God's word to us, afraid of being vulnerable. Lots of things can make us feel this way, people, circumstances, situations with which we live. It's easy for something good to be snatched away before it can take root.

Yet the sower casts the seed on all, in hope.

There is the rocky ground, where there are pockets of soil between the rocks. A seed might take root, but its roots can't grow deep. When harsh weather comes, it withers. It can't access the deeper soil where there is moisture. We all have rocky patches when our faith falters, when questions crowd in, and seeds of possibility aren't able to take root.

Yet the sower casts the seed on all, in hope.

Then there is the ground where the thorns grow, and the new growth is choked by thorns and weeds. There are many things that choke so there's not enough space to breathe, to grow. The pressures on our time and our resources. Our sense of obligation to others. Worries and concerns. Sometimes just too many things, even if they are good things. What things choke the seeds, block the sunlight, soak up the nutrients they need to grow?

Yet the sower casts the seed on all, in hope.

And there is good soil, where there is space and moisture and sunlight, where the seed takes root and grows strong, in ground which is rich and open. We know those moments too.

The sower casts the seed on all, in hope.

What resonates with you today, from these descriptions? Which types of soil are most prevalent in the ground of your heart today?

Look without judging — just notice. And consider, what do I need to enable me to be more able to receive the word of God for me today more freely?

Spend as much time with this reflection as feels right, pausing the recording if you want to, and talk to the Sower about what you've reflected on. Be honest about how you feel. Ask for what you need. To repeat the words of Macrina Weiderkehr: "The Sower believes in the land of your heart and wants to be intimately involved in the daily dusty ordinariness of your life."

Sometimes land will be prepared for sowing in specific ways. It is often ploughed to remove the stubble of a previous crop, opened up and turned over so that fresh earth is ready to receive the seed. It might be harrowed to break up the clods of soil further. We might resist the thought of being opened up, and perhaps with reason, yet there are benefits to opened ground.

The phrase is used in this poem by Seamus Heaney, the first of his *Glanmore Sonnets*, written after he moved with his wife and children to Glanmore in Co. Wicklow in 1972, away from Belfast, which was mired in the Troubles. Away from his nine to five job, too, to make more time for writing. The "opened ground" in the poem is a metaphor for the opening up of his creative life. Given that he continued to draw inspiration from his home place, family and upbringing, the ghosts he mentions towards the end of the poem are familiar ones, coming to sow their inspiration in the newly opened furrows.

Vowels ploughed into other: opened ground.
The mildest February for twenty years
Is mist bands over furrows, a deep no sound
Vulnerable to distant gargling tractors.
Our road is steaming, the turned-up acres breathe.
Now the good life could be to cross a field
And art a paradigm of earth new from the lathe
Of ploughs. My lea is deeply tilled.
Old ploughsocks gorge the subsoil of each sense

And I am quickened with a redolence
Of farmland as a dark unblown rose.
Wait then . . . Breasting the mist, in sowers' aprons,
My ghosts come striding into their spring stations.
The dream grain whirls like freakish Easter snows.

Glanmore Sonnets I by Seamus Heaney

Is there an invitation to be open — or to allow yourself to be opened — to
receive the new?

PART ONE
FURTHER REFLECTION MATERIAL

The human spirit is much like a spring garden. If growth is to happen, it too must be made ready. The human spirit must be opened up if God's goodness is to grow there. Open minds and hearts are ready to receive the abundant life God constantly offers...

We may direct a lack of openness toward ourselves. We doubt our own growth or have unspoken expectations about who we are and who we can become. We doubt our own ability to 'rise from the dead' of our past. We close ourselves off to the possibility that we can grow beyond the chains that bind us or the personal history that has harmed us. We refuse to believe that our inner garden has great potential for growth if only its soil is turned over and seeded with hope and trust.

Nothing prevents personal transformation more than a closed mind or heart.

Joyce Rupp, *May I Have This Dance?*, Ave Maria Press, 1992

When dusk fell and I could go no longer [ploughing], I often caught the sharp whiff of smell coming from the upturned earth. Scent is a mighty marvel. What it is I do not know. But I knew what this smell was, which is the most intoxicating of all. It was fertility: it was life itself coming across to me in pure sensation — the odour of eternal resurrection from the dead.

John Stuart Collis, *The Worm Forgives the Plough*,
Charles Knight & co, 1973

"God is the ground, the grounding, that which grounds us. We experience this when we understand that soil is holy, water gives life, the sky opens our imagination, our roots matter, home is a divine place, and our lives are linked with our neighbours' and with those around the globe. This world, not heaven, is the sacred stage of our times."

Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded: Finding God in the World*, HarperOne, 2015

The Sower Revisited

Our temptation is often to hear this parable and believe that there is a good kind of dirt and a bad kind of dirt. There is dirt that yields an abundant harvest which God likes and a dirt that is closed off, disbelieving, and worrisome which is somehow less than what God wants...

Maybe this morning you feel like the hardened path. Maybe you feel trampled on like a footpath, ignored and walked over by life and those you love. Maybe you feel like every small moment of joy, every seed of faith, or hope, or love, is immediately snatched away by the birds.

Maybe you feel like you've fallen on thin and rocky soil. You've felt your faith spring up only to have it falter under its own belief system. Maybe you've had your faith scorched by the oppressive heat of life. Perhaps you look around at the racism, the economic injustice, the poverty, the hunger, the sexism, the war, or just the plain everyday selfishness of humankind and faith seems like such a fool's errand in the face of it. Where is God in this mess you ask, as you feel like wilting and withering away?

Maybe you feel like you've fallen among the thorns and brambles of life. Maybe for you simply getting out of bed in the morning involves the sharp pain of living, of moving, of breathing. Perhaps it's grief that sticks in your side and it feels like you've run too far for too long and there's not enough space to breathe, to stretch, to grow. Maybe it's the ceaseless demands of time to work, to family, to church, to the obligations that once seemed like growth but now seem like some kind of overgrowth that blocks out the sun, the warmth and source of life.

And maybe you look over and see the person sitting next to you in the pew, and you think, "My goodness they seem to have it together... They must be growing in good soil."

And suddenly, this parable about God's irresponsible love for us becomes a parable about how we judge ourselves....

There is no judgment and no condemnation in the story. The soil exists as it is. The sower doesn't spend any time wondering whether the rocky, or the hardened, or the thorny soil measures up or is worthy of the sower's seeds — the very source of his life and livelihood. The sower simply sows without judgment and without expectation.

'Dirt Is Resurrection And God Is A Bad Farmer (Homily For The Parable Of The Sower)', by David Roberts, www.patheos.com

Reflection Exercise

“Many seeds have already been sown in you...”

Macrina Wiederkehr, *The Song of the Seed*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1995

You might like to spend a little time looking back on how the seeds of God’s Word have fallen in your life. Of course there will be many. Sit quietly and see which seeds come to your attention.

Notice the ones which fell on good soil. Did they grow well?

Perhaps others took some time to start growing?

Were there other times when something good appeared to be snatched away?

Or seeds which struggled to take root in rocky soil? (Perhaps they grew anyway, it was just a bit more difficult.)

Or found that their growth was choked by weeds and thorns?

Perhaps you have been able to see the fruit — or flowers, or grain crop — of seeds which were planted in your life early on?

Do this gently, with compassion — don’t judge, or fall into recriminations. If you feel yourself being dragged down into a negative spiral, stop and gently focus on the positive.

After you’ve spent some time with this, see if you are noticing any patterns being repeated. Consider what you’ve learned, and how you might move towards being more open to the seeds of loves which are being sown in your life. Bring it all into a conversation with with Jesus or with God.



The amount of soil you can scoop up in your bare hands will contain:

- 5,000 insects, arachnids, worms and molluscs
 - 100,000 protozoa
 - 10,000 nematodes
 - 500 metres of plants roots
 - 100 billion bacteria
 - 100km of fungal filaments
-plus algae, archaea and more.

From Matthew Evans, *Soil: The Incredible Story of What Keeps the Earth, and Us, Healthy*. Murdoch Books, 2021

Good soil isn't just an abstract concept; it's a thing of wonder. Far from being an inert, full, stable entity, it's teeming with life, and forever in a state of flux. On the visible scale, there's little to hint at the wondrous activity and industry that lies within.

Matthew Evans, *Soil: The Incredible Story of What Keeps the Earth, and Us, Healthy*. Murdoch Books, 2021

PART TWO TRANSCRIPT

Sower

“The idea of God is much on my mind these days.”

Octavia Butler, *The Parable of the Sower*

This second reflection is an invitation to revisit the same parable but to direct our gaze in a different direction. In the last reflection, we thought about the soil. Now, let’s focus on the Sower. Relatively little is said about the Sower in the story, he is simply there, it feels almost as if he is hiding in plain sight.

But this is no ordinary Sower. Macrina Weiderkehr, herself a child of the farm, says that no earthly sower would have been so wasteful. This one is casting out seeds “with wild abandon”, on to the path, the rocky ground and in amongst the thorns and briars. “Hope,” she adds, “is the force behind this sowing.”

Sowing anything is an act of hope. One seed manufacturer even claimed: “We don’t sell seeds, we sell optimism.” It seems so improbable that a tiny dead-looking grain can be placed in the earth and grow into a vibrant living plant. When the artist and filmmaker Derek Jarman wrote: “The gardener digs in another time... Here is the Amen beyond the prayer” I think he was writing about that fact that a garden is an investment in the future, you dream it into being for generations who will come after you.

What does God the Sower dream into being? The good soil, the parable says, yields 30 or 60 or 100 times what was sown, an extraordinary harvest, even in places with more plentiful rains than the land where Jesus was telling his story. This sower dreams big. He dreams of abundance.

Take a few moments now to be still. Put aside anything you are holding, and take time to let the noise of the world quieten, both outside and inside us. Think about your body, how you are supported where you are sitting, how you are in contact with the floor as a gesture of grounding. Can

you draw your shoulders down if they are tense, let them gently drop? Can you open your hands as a gesture that you are ready to receive the gift which might come to you today?

Get in touch with your breathing, simply tuning in to its rhythm without trying to change it. Then you might try to deepen your breath, letting the rhythm slow a little further. See if you can focus for a moment on nothing else, noticing where you are feeling the breath in your body, taking time to notice the different places where you might be aware of it — in your nose or throat, in the rise and fall of your chest.

Is it possible to be ease in this quiet place, attentive but comfortable? If distractions come in, can you gently put them on one side? It is here that God waits for us, the God who longs for connection with us, who welcomes us into this place of connection. Can you feel yourself welcomed by the God of love and compassion? Is there anything you would like to ask for at this time?

I'm going to read the parable of the sower again, and this time we might listen from another perspective. In the last reflection, we were looking at the soil; now we are looking at the sower, who is understood to be an image of God or Jesus. What might this image have to show us? Perhaps a picture might begin to form as you listen to the passage. And see if the other material adds extra layers of richness to that picture.

Luke 8: 4-8

While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable: 'A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.

This poem by Edward Thomas is a reflection on a day's sowing. It is evening and the sower is lingering at dusk enjoying the sense of a satisfying day's work being completed. It has a sense of quiet joy.

Sowing

It was a perfect day
For sowing; just
As sweet and dry was the ground
As tobacco dust.

I tasted deep the hour
Between the far
Owl's chuckling first soft cry
And the first star.

A long stretched hour it was:
Nothing undone
Remained; the early seeds
All safely sown.

And now, hark at the rain,
Windless and light,
Half a kiss, half a tear,
Saying good-night.

Edward Thomas

And here is David Roberts reflecting specifically on the Sower in the parable:

The sower [in the parable] doesn't spend any time wondering whether the rocky, or the hardened, or the thorny soil measures up or is worthy of the sower's seeds — the very source of his life and livelihood.

The sower simply sows without judgment and without expectation...

It doesn't matter what kind of soil you are. God doesn't care, either. Because God is the sower. And God doesn't stop sowing the seeds of divine love because the soil isn't perfect. Rather God is busy sowing indiscriminately, irresponsibly, irrationally. This parable is a reminder that it doesn't matter if your faith is dried up, withered, and dead. God is still sowing love, and always will. God is the relentless and lavish sower.

That's the scandal of this parable. God is throwing seeds around like an intoxicated fool at the bar buying another round of drinks that she can't afford. There's no limit to the extravagance, to the generosity and love.

David Roberts, *Dirt Is Resurrection And God Is A Bad Farmer*
(Homily For The Parable Of The Sower) on www.patheos.com

In *The Worm Forgives the Plough*, John Stewart Collis, biographer, author and pioneer of the ecology movement, writes about working on farms as part of the Land Army during World War II. In this extract, notice the feelings he expresses as he describes going back to a field where he had helped to sow — broadcasting the seed by hand, very much in the way the parable describes.

A fortnight to three weeks having elapsed since I had broadcast seed... I decided to have a look at that field... I had little real idea of what precisely I should see. On approaching the field I saw a low green mist clinging to it, which turned out to be substance in the nature of grass, now covering what had been the brown surface of the field.

I dug up a spadefull. We had sown a mixture of oats and peas. Those handfuls of round and oblong caskets that I had helped to broadcast had performed a peculiar act after leaving the hand and reaching the soil. Quite dead in the sack, it had seemed; but on touching the soil they had become animated, alive and full of surprising moves. It were as if that little oat-seed, a tiny and inferior-looking piece of matter such as one might chip off a log, had been galvanised on being touched by Earth....

We imagine Creation took place in the remote past. No doubt it did; but the same thing takes place today. The Third Day of Creation... happens once every year. As I stand beside the rising corn I feel no need to have been present on the Third Day of the First Week, since I am witnessing the same thing. The same Force is at work, the same Voice obeyed. That which I would have seen then, I see now — sheer miracle, pure purpose.

John Stewart Collis, *The Worm Forgives the Plough*,
Charles Knight & Co, 1973

What picture is forming in your mind of the divine Sower?

What might be in the Sower's mind as he casts the seed, not only towards what looks like good soil, but on the path, among the rocks, into the weeds and thorny ground?

What does the Sower hope for? What does he dream for the seeds he sows?

And how does he feel to look upon the "low green mist" of new growth on a field he planted?

What would you like to say to the Sower now?

PART TWO FURTHER REFLECTION MATERIAL

This is a story about the passion of an extravagantly lavish sower. Having grown up on a farm, I remember enough about sowing seed to know that one doesn't cast out seeds willy-nilly as this sower did. It is true there is a method of scattering seeds called broadcasting, but even when you are broadcasting you stay out of briars, rocks and pathways.

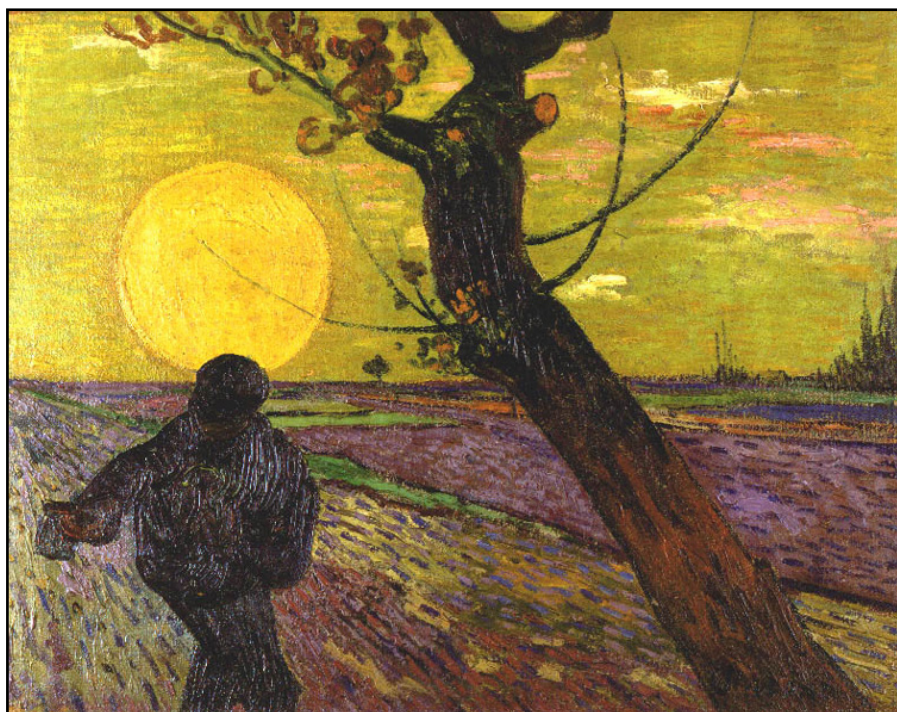
We know, of course, that the sower Jesus speaks of in this parable is a loving Father, a nurturing Mother. This is our God, the Divine Sower, who is so intent on getting the Word out that the possibility of losing a few seeds is a small matter. Hope is the force behind this sowing. This is a sower who trusts the soil — who believes that the soil has soul. Thus the seed is cast out with wild abandon.

Macrina Weiderkehr, *The Song of the Seed*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1995

I have eleven fields, all grass, all hedged, all part of one farm. They are all, to a stranger, pretty much of a piece, and pretty much the same as other fields on other farms around here... they are part of what strangers call 'a landscape'... These words dissolve when you know a place. With knowledge the landscape becomes its constituent parts, breaks up into farms and farms into their woods, tracks and rough places, the stream beds where the moss is thick and nightingales sing, damp places where rushes grow and after rain the water collects in little grass-drowning pools.

That is the level at which I know my farm. There's no need for a satellite fix of what grows where, of the fertile or infertile patches, the over-enriched dock-thickened parts or those where the soil has disappeared to a sliver as thin as the quick from under a fingernail, the grasses and daisies growing straight and thin out of the naked clay. I know all these things yard by yard.

Adam Nicolson in the Introduction to *Field Days: An Anthology of Poetry*, Green Books Ltd, 1998. He goes on to explain that each of his eleven fields has a name.



Vincent Van Gogh, *The Sower*, 1888, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Reflection Exercise

Vincent Van Gogh painted and drew the sower over 30 times. He was drawn back again and again to the motif of the sower by the way it embodied the connection between the worker and the land, the cyclical rhythms of nature, the promise of new life and the persistence of hope. As a former preacher and missionary, he would have been very familiar with its Christian connotations.

This painting opposite, from 1888, from the collection of the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, was in the Van Gogh exhibition last autumn at the National Gallery in London. It shows the artist at the height of his powers with expressive colour: pale green sky, purple fields and the sun setting behind the sower's head, like a halo on a Byzantine altarpiece.

Spent some time with the painting, simply looking. Notice the colours, the shapes, the moods. Allow any thoughts or feelings to emerge gently — don't force them, and don't be tempted to analyse the picture too much. Where do you find yourself drawn to looking? What thoughts do you find yourself thinking? What feelings are evoked?

Take time to talk with God about the picture, or what has stirred within you, and allow God to respond.

The first crocus is out in the front garden, one of the corms I planted last year in little pockets of peat in the shingle. It struggled to open all morning, finally drawing the sunlight to itself as the sun disappeared behind the house.

Jan 5th, 1989, *Modern Nature: The Journals of Derek Jarman*, Century, 1991

PART THREE TRANSCRIPT

Seed

“...just as a seed dreams secretly of the flower it will one day be, even though it has never seen a flower.”

Margaret Silf

Seeds are beginnings — or perhaps they are what comes before that, the kernel which contains the energy of the beginning. We might talk of seeds of inspiration, seeds of hope, seeds of a good idea, seeds of trouble, seeds of conflict. If God is the sower in the parable of the sower, and we are the ground, what are the seeds which are sown?

In her book *Landmarks*, Margaret Silf describes our connection to God in terms of a “Godseed” planted in the heartsoil of our being when we were created: a kernel of God-in-us which is waiting to be germinated by a touch from the transcendent God outside us. That connection activates our relationship with God and the seed begins to grow, an expression of our true self whom God is creating.

Macrina Wiederkehr writes that the seeds sown in our lives are “seeds of our potential... sparks of the divine.” One might describe them as invitations into more and deeper life, which will help us grow into the people God dreams for us to be. God continues to sow them throughout our lives. The more we understand about them, the more we can be aware of them, and nurture their growth in our lives

In invite you take some time to be still, to make a conscious decision to move away from the busyness of today, and whatever pressures are around in life, to carve out some time which is set apart. Take a moment to pause, to know that you have arrived in this quiet place. Spend a few minutes just being aware of your surroundings, being present to this moment.

You might like to move your gaze inwards, to connect with your heart centre. If it's comfortable, you might like to lay a hand on your heart, to make that gesture of connection. Just spend a little while listening to your breathing, connecting with its rhythm, noticing the life that flows in you. Be present to that life, and be aware of your body, listen to what it needs today.

Then take a moment to notice the weather of your inner landscape, the tone of your inner world. How are you feeling today? Is there sunshine or rain, or a mixture of the two? Is the inner sky grey and heavy? Just receive this as it is, without judging it. Is there anything you would like to ask for, as you come into this time of prayer?

To begin, a few lines from Isaiah:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return to it without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
so is my word that goes out from my mouth;
it will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

Isaiah 55: 10-11

What does it mean to think about this passage in light of the seeds of the "word of God" which fall gently in the soil of our hearts?

Now, I invite you to listen to this passage from *Landmarks* by Margaret Silf:

As Christians we talk about God being both immanent (present to us, individually and collectively, in our hearts and in our human experience) and transcendent (utterly beyond our reach or imagination, totally 'other' and without limits).

My Godseed, I believe, is nothing less than the immanent God locked up in my heart, and waiting to be set free in an act of germination, an act of resurrection. How does the germination happen? There are countless ways, and we can never pin God down by trying to define how God will act. One way of visualising this mystery is to notice moments when we seem to be in

contact with something, or someone, beyond ourselves... We know, at times like these, that something has happened that is different from the normal run of our daily lives, even though not separated from it. We might say that we feel as if we have been 'touched by God'. It could have happened in all sorts of ways — through a moment of intense communion with nature, or a human relationship, a moment of deep insight that seemed to come from beyond ourselves, or perhaps a sudden clarity that showed us the way forward in a particular situation.

When these moments happen, we could say that God has not only 'touched' us but has somehow 'taken root' in our lived experience. That touch of Life will, if we allow it to, penetrate down through the layers of our experience until it reaches the centre. There, the transcendent God who 'touched' us will join with the immanent God locked up, like a seed, in our hearts, and something new will grow from that union... The flower (or plant or bush or tree!) will be the unique manifestation (or incarnation) of God that is ours, and ours alone, to bring forth. If we do not bring it to birth, it will not come to birth.... It is God's dream for us. It is the inner mystery of ourselves that is already known — has always been known — to God, that God is longing to bring to fulfilment.

From Margaret Silf, *Landmarks*, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1998

I find that a helpful image to describe a process which is generally mysterious and — as Margaret rightly says — mind-blowing. It is, of course, only a metaphor. Does it resonate with you? Perhaps you can identify a moment in your life when the God-seed within you sprang into life. You might like to take some time to think about what that process has been for you — there is no one right or wrong way, God deals with each of us differently. Do you remember what it felt like at the time? Perhaps you understand it a bit differently now? Spend some time talking with God about what you think and feel.

Now take some time to consider the "flower or plant or bush or tree" which began to grow at the moment? Can you imagine what it looks like? Remember we are putting words and images around things which are entirely mysterious, the word or image will never describe it exactly, but they might help us to understand it a little. What stage of growth is that

flower or plant or bush or tree at? Is it continuing to grow and develop? What does it need now?

You might like to draw or paint the flower, plant or tree you are picturing, or express it in another creative way.

In visualising the plant which is the unique manifestation of your self in God, you are tapping into deep longings and desires. Understanding more about our deepest longings is a powerful way to understand something of God's dream for us. The seeds God sows in our lives speak to those deep longings, striking chords which resonate with us deep in our hearts. If we can discern our deepest longings, that will help us with the smaller, daily choices we make about how to live into our unique calling.

Philip Sheldrake writes:

The more authentic our desires, the more they touch upon our identities and also upon the reality of God at the heart of ourselves. Our most authentic desires spring ultimately from the deep wells of our being where the longing for God runs freely. This is so even if the desires are not always expressed in explicitly religious terms...

Philip Sheldrake, *Befriending Our Desires*, Novalis, 2001.

A few succinct lines from Jeanne Emrich to close:

dry seeds scatter
from my hand into the wind
one clings
as if to say
there is in me
something yet
to be

Jeanne Emrich

PART THREE
FURTHER REFLECTION MATERIAL

[In prayer and reflections] seeds will be sown in the land of your heart. These seeds, wisdom from the Scriptures, are like footprints linking you to the One who is continually singing you into new life. The Word of God bounding from the heavens to the earth leaves an invisible trail that is part of your salvation history. It is your personal songline — your connection to the Divine Sower.

Just as there are seeds in the soil, so too there are secrets in the soil. The right seed touching the right secret can produce an abundance of new life.

Macrina Wiederkehr, *The Song of the Seed*.

I dug up a spadefull. We had sown a mixture of oats and peas. Those handfulls of round and oblong caskets that I had helped to broadcast had performed a peculiar act after leaving the hand and reaching the soil. Quite dead in the sack, it had seemed; but on touching the soil they had become animated, alive and full of surprising moves. It were as if that little oat-seed, a tiny and inferior-looking piece of matter such as one might chip off a log, had been galvanised on being touched by Earth....

John Stewart Collis, *The Worm Forgives the Plough*

Always better than advertised

Imagine a simple seed packet... It probably has a brightly coloured picture on it of what the seeds inside will be when they come to fullness of their life. Maybe it was this picture that enticed you to buy the seed packet in the first place...

Now imagine the seeds themselves. They don't look even remotely like the picture on the packet. If you didn't know about seeds, and how they grow into something wildly different, you would think you had been taken for a ride by the seed merchant. You might just throw them away and cut your losses. But you do know about seeds. You do know they grow into something very different. And you know it takes time. On the basis of this knowledge, you dig a hole in the ground and bury them! Then you wait, in hope and in faith, for the day when they will reveal themselves for what they truly are.

When that day comes, the revelation of the fullness of the plant and the flower will show up the picture on the packet for what it is — just a two-dimensional impression of all that is to come... Once the real thing arrives, you'll not be looking at the picture any more. You'll be burying your nose in the blossom and rejoicing at what has grown in the soil of your garden...

We are seeds like that, but we don't really know anything about who we really are. And so we easily see ourselves, and each other, as a waste of space and throw ourselves away. Or we put the seed packet up on a little shrine, and worship it every so often, but never scatter the contents. God knows all about seeds like us. God plants them and waters them and waits for them to grow — as long as it takes. And we can either cooperate in the growth, or we can stay in the packet.

Which do you choose?

Margaret Silf, *Roots and Wings*, Darton, Longman & Todd, 2006.

Reflection Exercise

Many seeds of all kinds will have been sown in your life since that first moment collection. How to describe them? Perhaps the beginning of an interest or passion, the invitation to a new relationship, career, ministry, or chapter in life. Some will have taken root and shaped your life, others perhaps blossomed for a while and then become less important. There will be a tapestry of growth and life, a garden of different colours.

You might like to reflect on a few of them. Sit quietly and watch as they come to the surface. When one "seed" is at the forefront of your mind, consider these questions:

What was the invitation?

What did it feel like?

What happened?

Are there any patterns, any factors in common? Perhaps a sense of how God deals with you will start to form which might help you be alert to future invitations and possibilities. Is there anything you would like to say to God, or give thanks for?

PART FOUR TRANSCRIPT

Seedlings

“Listen! In the earth, the seeds are stirring.”

Nancy Wood

A few days ago, my neighbour’s garden exploded into crocuses. That’s the only way I can think of to describe it. A tidy winter garden of bare earth and cropped grass was suddenly full of little purple flowers, faces open to the sun. Then I realised the same had happened in my local park, purple and white crocuses carpeting the grass. I didn’t notice the green shoots emerging. They seem to have come from nowhere.

I wonder why our own spiritual growth is often a bit like that. We barely notice it happening — sometimes it is easier for someone else to notice. And then suddenly, as if from nowhere, there are flowers. I think that’s why the parable of the growing seed, which appears just after the Sower in Mark’s gospel, rings so true. The ground seems to produce the corn “all by itself”, and suddenly it is time for harvest. We can almost hear the farmer’s bemusement.

It’s true that much about spiritual growth is mysterious, but perhaps there are ways we can tune in to it more. And, while we can’t control it, or make it happen, perhaps there are things we can do to encourage the right conditions. If the ground of our hearts is rocky, perhaps we can clear some stones, and we can do some weeding, though as every gardener knows this job is never finished. And we can water. This reflection draws on Saint Teresa of Avila, who compares growing in prayer to watering a garden. The gardener who waters diligently will also notice how the seedlings are growing.

I invite you to come into a time of quietness. To take time to be still, and let some of the noise of the world about you quieten down. Take time to connect with yourself, with your body. Notice how you’re sitting, how your body is being supported, how you are grounded by your contact with the floor. Take time to get in touch with how your body is feeling, whether you are at

ease today, whether there are any places where you feel unease, and listen to those places, ask them what they need.

Connect with your breath, with the rhythm of your body. Without changing it, just listen to it, feel the breath in the body, noticing how you feel it, whether in the nose or mouth or in the rise and fall of the ribcage. Allow yourself to breathe a little more deeply, letting your body move to a place of greater stillness. Breathe in the quietness, even if your mind is still hurrying about, let the quietness draw near to you.

In that place of connection, can you also become aware of the Other, the God who draws close to us so quietly that we're often too busy to notice? Are you able to be open to the possibility of that encounter? To feel welcomed by the all-knowing One, knowing that there is no judgment, only welcome. To be as you are in the presence of the Holy. And speak the grace you would like to ask for today.

Listen to these words from the letter of James:

James 5: 7-8

Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.

James mentions patience three times in two verses. This is unlikely to be a surprise to those who like to grow things. New growth can seem to take an age to reveal itself, particularly if you are waiting for it. How frustrating it is to long for growth in your spiritual life, and yet struggle to see any trace of it. There is a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins in the reflection material for this section which expresses this frustration. Often we need more patience than we ever thought. Sometimes a seed can lie dormant in the ground until there seems little hope of it growing at all, only to germinate and suddenly put forth shoots and leaves.

Perhaps James' words are not just an exhortation to be patient, but also an invitation to treat ourselves with compassion. It's easy to blame ourselves for

what feels like a lack of progress, when there are factors around us over which we have little control. If we must wait, let's be kind to ourselves while we wait.

Now, I invite you to reflect with a rich extended metaphor from Saint Teresa of Avila, who compares the role of the pilgrim growing in relationship with God to cultivating a garden on barren soil, and the process of growing in prayer to watering that garden.

“And with the help of God,” she writes, “we must strive like good gardeners to get these plants to grow and take pains to water them so that they don't wither but come to bud and flower and give forth a most pleasant fragrance to provide refreshment for this Lord of ours. Then He will often come to take delight in this garden and find His joy among these virtues.”

[Quotations are from *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Vol. 1. Otilo Rodriquez and Kieran Kavanaugh, translators. ICS Publications.]

She offers four images of watering as stages of growth in prayer. I would suggest that the experience is not always completely linear: one might be in the early stages, and yet experience something of the richness of mature prayer. Equally, one might be further down the road, only to find oneself temporarily back near the beginning. Listen and see what resonates with you.

Teresa's first stage of watering involves using a bucket to draw water out of a well. It's hard work. Lowering down the bucket, then hauling it back up, trying not to spill, carrying it to the plants, going back again, over and over. One bucketful seems to accomplish very little. The job can seem endless, and exhausting.

The practices of prayer can be hard. We work hard to use our mental faculties, and the practices we have learned, but the attention keeps wandering and must be brought back time and again, and the rewards can feel few. Teresa's encouragement is to keep going, keep practising, persevere.

The second stage of watering is like filling the bucket from a water wheel. Now the water is drawn up mechanically, so there is less graft. There is still some fetching and carrying, the process is perhaps still a bit mechanical at times, but there is more flow, more connection.

At this stage, in prayer, we are able to sense something coming from beyond ourselves at least some of the time. As the practice becomes more familiar to us, there are gifts which arrive through it and we are better able to receive them. In Teresa's words "grace is more clearly manifest to the soul".

In the third stage, the garden is being watered by a stream. It actually feels as if we are doing comparatively little work, and the "watering" is in the hands of God. The only work we might do is to redirect water from the stream to an area of the garden which particularly needs it. Our soul is growing more aligned with the will of God, the practice of prayer is more natural, more organic.

Teresa writes: "The Lord so desires to help the gardener here that He Himself practically becomes the gardener and the one who does everything... The consolation, the sweetness, and the delight are incomparably greater than that experienced in the previous prayer."

Perhaps you can begin to imagine the fourth stage. In this stage, the "watering" is by the rain which comes from God. We have no work to do, the watering is gift, and we are those to whom it is given. This is water of the kind that Jesus described to the woman at the well, "a spring of living water welling up to eternal life".

It is a consolation so profound that we barely understand it. The senses are overwhelmed as the cool refreshing rain falls on the plants in the garden. It's perhaps worth bearing in mind that Teresa, writing in western Spain, might have a slightly different view of rain than those of us who live in the UK!

What she describes echoes the words in Isaiah 58:11:

"The Lord will guide you always;
he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land
and will strengthen your frame.
You will be like a well-watered garden,
like a spring whose waters never fail."

Teresa writes this:

In all the prayer and modes of prayer that were explained, the gardener does some work, even though in these latter modes the work is accompanied by so much glory and consolation for the soul that it would never want to abandon this prayer. As a result, the prayer is not experienced as work but as glory. In this fourth water the soul isn't in possession of its senses, but it rejoices without understanding what it is rejoicing in. It understands that it is enjoying a good in which are gathered together all good, but this good is incomprehensible. All the senses are occupied in this joy in such a way that none is free to be taken up with any other exterior or interior thing.

The journey which Teresa describes is gradual, and reaching the final stage could take a lifetime. God will draw us along it at a pace which is suitable for us, reaching each stage only when we are ready for it, revealing it to us a bit at a time and allowing us to adjust. Notice that the later stages bring joy, not only for us but for God as well, walking with us in the well-watered garden, enjoying the growth of what God has planted there.

Do you have a sense of where your experience meets what Teresa describes? Remember to look on yourself with compassion, don't find fault with yourself if you feel you don't measure up. There are no experts in prayer.

Notice your feelings as you reflect on this — in particular if there is a longing, a thirst. What is your desire in your relationship with God? What words would you use to express it? Be still now and hold that prayer before God, wait and sense whether there might be a response.

To close, these words from Joyce Rupp:

O dormant seed within me,
I believe in your potential.
I will open the soil of my heart for you.
I will warm you with my patience and trust.
I will water you with droplets of faith, hope and love.

from *The Circle of Life*, Joyce Rupp & Macrina Wiederkehr, Sorin Books, 2005.

PART FOUR FURTHER REFLECTIVE MATERIAL

This poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins (who was a Jesuit priest as well as a poet) expresses the frustration of not seeing the growth one hopes for in one's spiritual walk. Plants are green and blossoming, but time makes a fool of him with his lack of progress, however hard he tries. Yet he doesn't give up, he prays, contending with God in poetry which pulses with energy.

Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend
With thee; but, sir, so what I plead is just.
Why do sinners' ways prosper? and why must
Disappointment all I endeavour end?

Wert thou my enemy, O thou my friend,
How wouldst thou worse, I wonder, than thou dost
Defeat, thwart me? Oh, the sots and thralls of lust
Do in spare hours more thrive than I that spend,
Sir, life upon thy cause. See, banks and brakes
Now, leavèd how thick! lacèd they are again
With fretty chervil, look, and fresh wind shakes
Them; birds build – but not I build; no, but strain,
Time's eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes.
Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain.

Thinning Out

When raising plants from seed, it is common to thin out the seedlings when they are still small, removing many of them in order to give the remaining plants room to grow. We might need to consider if we have room in our lives for the growth we dream about.

Holding all things in balance, and discerning carefully, we might find we need to let a few things go in order to have the necessary space to address the possibilities which ring true with our deepest desires.

Reflection Exercise

The Parable of the Growing Wheat is one of the more puzzling of Jesus' grain parables. Yet it resonates, too, because it seems to express something which is a common experience of growth. Read it slowly and prayerfully, noticing if anything is standing out to you.

Mark 4: 26-29

[Jesus] also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain — first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."

If something stands out, turn it over thoughtfully in your heart, ponder how it might be speaking to you.

Does the experience described resonate with you in your own life, or any aspect of your work or ministry?

Then speak to God in prayer, giving voice to your thoughts, feelings and questions.

Is there anything you would like to stay with for a while, or come back to?

Struggling Wheat

(from the French of Jeanne Perdriel-Vassière)

Struggling wheat, weighed down with rain,
which the sun scarce dries again,
Under a treacherous cloud unkind,
Between two passions of the wind:

Scanty wheat that cannot veil
The doomed nest and young of quail
From the hawk that in the sky
Planes with ruin in his eye:

Child of the cold grudging clay,
Weeping when not parched away,
By the inconstant season harried
Even till you are cut and carried:

Still you strive with effort grim
To touch the overhanging limb
Of the tree that keeps the sun
For himself, and leaves you none.

Blackened wheat, and wheat of tears,
Earth besmirched and ruined ears,
Brave as an ill-fated man
Who does, though dying, what he can:

Take from this transient mind and eye
This look, this thought of sympathy;
Not leaden pity, but the love
Your gallant life is worthy of.

Ruth Pitter

PART FIVE TRANSCRIPT

God's Field

“Don’t judge each day by the harvest you reap but by the seeds you plant.”

Robert Louis Stevenson

Jesus was speaking to people who lived in an agrarian society, so it’s no surprise that his stories and parables are full of crops and fields, seedtime and harvest. Often, he describes God the father as the owner of a field, and invites people to be his workers. Even as seeds are sown in our lives, so we are invited to sow seeds in the heart soil of those whose lives we touch, precious kernels of hope, love, invitation.

Like planting anything, it is an act of hope. It’s more than likely we won’t ever know whether that seed grows, or what it grows into. Equally, the people we meet in our lives, jobs, ministries, will have seeds planted in them by others. Perhaps it is our role to tend them for a while, nurture them and encourage their growth. We might need to understand something of their story in order to do this well, and again we might not see the plants which result.

Jesus seems to advise caution on weeding out too much in the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds, which follows the Parable of the Sower in Matthew’s Gospel. It’s a knottier parable than the Sower, in which the Farmer, who sowed the good seed in the field, has to decide whether or not to pull up the weeds growing among the wheat. His servants are keen to do so, but he counsels: Let the wheat and the weeds grow together until the harvest. To modern ears, this sounds like a caution about making too quick a judgement on what might be growing in another person’s life. Let time decide, let God decide.

I invite you take some time to create a space for stillness. To know that even the intention to sit and be still, even moving physically into that still place, is the beginning of prayer. See if you can lay to one side the things which might be tugging at your attention, and be gentle with yourself, be at ease, and let peace find you.

Be attentive to your breathing, to the breath which gives you life, to the heartbeat in you which is sacred and unique, giving life to your body. Know that that unique heartbeat is a reflection of the One who created us, and who continues creating us. Take a moment to rest with that thought, that my heart beating also reflects the pulse of a greater heartbeat which gives you, all of us, every living thing, its life.

God draws close to us, happy to be intimately involved in the business of our lives, the messy things as well as the tidy ones. As God looks on us with compassion, so God invites us to look with compassion on ourselves, and those around us. Is there any area of my life which is particularly in need of compassion today? Is there a situation in my life, or family, or work, or ministry which needs a touch of grace?

In that quiet place, listen to these words from Paul in 1 Corinthians. Listen to these words with the ears of the heart, let them fall gently. Notice any word or phrase which seems to resonate with you, which calls to you in some way, tugs on your attention.

1 Corinthians 3: 5-9

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe — as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labour. For we are fellow workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building.

As you listen again, collect any words that are resonating with you, or you might find an image is forming in your mind. Or perhaps a particular situation or memory is coming to the surface. Sit with it in the silence, examine it, wonder what it might be showing you.

Then take it into prayer, talk to God about it. Ponder with God why this might be standing out to you today. How does it make you feel? Does it make you

think about particular situations in your community, your family, your work? Talk to God about what comes up for you.

As I read it one more time, listen for any invitation which seems to come up for you.

I'm going to invite you to listen, now, to the Parable of Wheat and Weeds, and to see if you can imagine Jesus telling this story. Allow time for a picture to form in your mind — where is he? Who is listening? Watch his tone and expression as he tells this story?

Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

"The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?'

"'An enemy did this,' he replied.

"The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?'

"'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'"

(Matthew 13: 24-29)

Watch carefully as this scene unfolds in the personal cinema of your imagination. What are you feeling as you watch and listen?

How does Jesus seem? What do you feel is the message he is trying to get across?

Once the imaginative part of the exercise feels complete, can you talk to Jesus — as Ignatius of Loyola would say, as a person talks to a friend — about anything which has come up for you in this passage.

I'm going to finish by reading some words come from Bishop Oscar Romero, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of San Salvador, who was assassinated in 1980 after speaking out on behalf of the poor and criticising the country's military government. He was canonized in 2018. I find these words not only wise but poignant, knowing that he did not live to see what might have felt like a conclusion to his ministry.

Reflection

It helps now and then to step back
and take the long view.
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts.
it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime
only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise
that is God's work.
Nothing we do is complete,
which is another way of saying
that the kingdom always lies beyond us.
No statement says all that could be said.
No prayer fully expresses our faith.
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.
No program accomplishes the church's mission.
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted,
knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces effects
far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything,
and there is a sense of liberation in realising that.
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.
It may be incomplete, a step along the way,

an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results,
but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.
We are workers, not master builders,
ministers, not messiahs.
We are prophets of a future not our own.

Oscar Romero

PART FIVE
FURTHER REFLECTION MATERIAL

The Wheat and the Weeds Revisited

By now, most of us have learned the rules of who belongs and who doesn't. We know who belongs and who doesn't belong — in this country, in our neighbourhoods, in our churches, in our jails, and on our deportation lists. We know who deserves life and who deserves to die. We know who the weeds are that need to be uprooted and thrown into our fires of judgment.

In other words, we know where our borders are. And who is allowed to cross them. It's the crossing of that border — into our territory — that turns a harmless plant into a weed...

The Master's response to his servants is understated, but quietly revolutionary. "Let them grow together," he says.

It's not your business, or even my business, to go around pulling weeds.

Let them grow together.

Imagine how different our world — even our churches would be — if every time we saw something that we didn't think belonged, every time we perceived a weed among the wheat, we took the Master's attitude rather than the servants'.

Let those that don't belong to each other grow together. Let those who don't fit into each other's neat fields of categories grow together. Let the wheat and the weeds grow together.

Let them grow together because the line between the weed and the wheat is much, much blurrier than we'd like to think. If it exists at all. Just as it's the crossing of a border that turns a plant into a weed to many, so it is that simple cultivation — love — transforms a weed in our eyes into a valued plant...

To me, it's not a promise of judgment. It's a promise of harvest. Harvest is about feeding people. It's about sustenance. It is about bounty and abundance. Our rapture-warped minds and end-times infected spirituality, however, have turned the theological idea of a harvest into something to be feared, a terrible separating of those who belong and those who don't.

But that's not what a harvest is about. Harvests bring together communities.

from David Roberts, *Let Them Grow Together: On Gaza, Migrants,
Refugees, Wheat And Weeds (A Homily)*, www.patheos.com

The Rocky Field Revisited

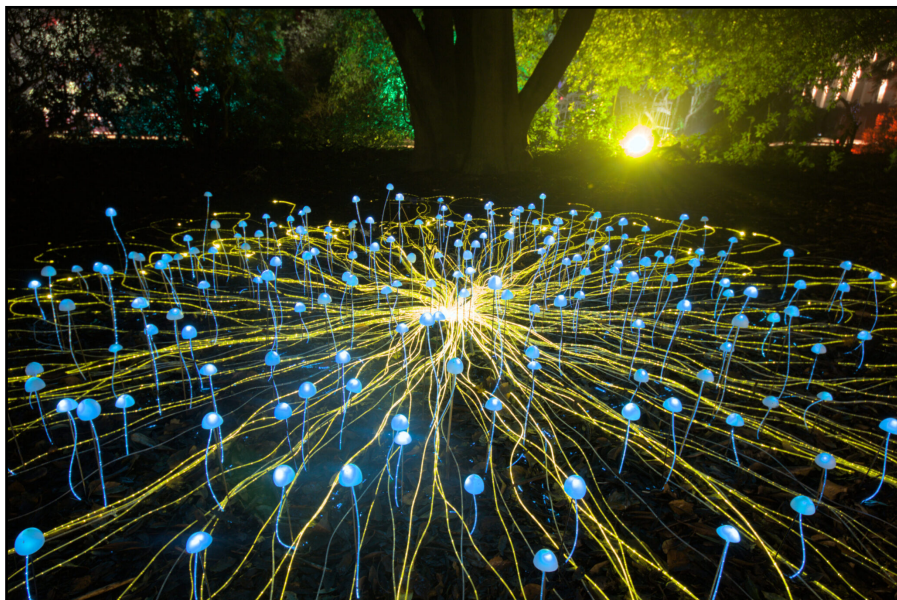
“I was amazed by the good crop of corn now coming up on another field which had seemed to me incredibly stony. ‘Some seeds fell upon stony ground’ — and did very well, it seems. Up to a point stones are an advantage, I learn, in terms of drainage. Yet looking at such a field earlier, so hard, so dry, so massively stony, the uninstructed spectator might well be pardoned for wondering how so tender a thing as a seed could derive nourishment there and cover it all with silky greens.”

John Stewart Collis, *The Worm Forgives the Plough*

Weeds revisited

The leading nature writer Richard Mabey makes a spirited defence of weeds in his book *Weeds: The Story of Outlaw Plants* (Profile, 2010). Context is all, he says. The plants we now regard as weeds were crops or medicinal plants several hundred years ago. Some of the most pernicious and toxic were brought to Europe to display in Victorian gardens. He writes:

“Weeds — even many intrusive aliens — give something back. They green over the dereliction that we have created. They move in to replace more sensitive plants that we have endangered. Their willingness to grow in the most hostile environments — a bombed city, a crack in a wall — means that they insinuate the idea of wild nature into places otherwise shorn of it. Although they follow and are dependent on human activities, their cussedness and refusal to play by our rules makes them subversive, the very essence of wildness.”



Reflection Exercise

The underground networks of mycelia which connect plants, trees and mushrooms are a comparatively recent scientific discovery. This light installation, *Mycelium Network*, by artist Stevie Thompson, founder of Custom Fibre Optics, and recently displayed at the Spectra Festival in Aberdeen, uses a delicate interlacing of fibre optic cables to make this amazing invisible network visible above the ground.

We are all part of networks and communities, no person — and no plant — is an island. Consider the networks you are part of. Where do they bring you nourishment and encouragement to grow what is best in you? Are you able to offer that to others? Are there any connections which are in need of repair? And do any feel restrictive of your growth?

Bring anything which comes up for you into conversation with God and pray it through in a spirit of compassion for others and for yourself.

PART SIX TRANSCRIPT

Hope

“Wherever hope rises, life rises.”

John S. Dunne

In John’s Gospel, in the chapters which record Jesus speaking to his disciples in the last days before his arrest, he says this: “Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.” (John 12:24). This seed metaphor is very different to the others we have looked at in this reflection, because here he is speaking about himself. The life cycle of the seed becomes a reflection of his life, death and resurrection.

Early on in this series, writer John Stewart Collis described digging up a handful of earth in which seeds had been scattered a few weeks before. He described in wonder how the seeds and grains had broken apart in order to put down roots and give out shoots of new life. Something which had appeared to him completely lifeless was suddenly bursting forth in life and energy.

There is a reflection here of the journey of Christ. A body which is dead is found to be alive, and not only alive in the same way as it was before, but much more alive, a glorious state of risen life which also gives life to others. If planting a seed is an act of hope, perhaps the Incarnation is the great act of hope God the Father invests in the world.

Woven through the Christian story is that golden thread of transformation. At moments when there appears to be little hope, surprising things happen. A packet of dead-looking seeds becomes a field of flowers, or beans, or cabbages. Flowers push their way between the cracks in pavements and blossom where derelict buildings once stood. A mustard seed which becomes a sprawling tree with birds nesting in its branches. Winter recedes and spring arrives again, full of new beginnings.

I invite you now to take a few moments to come into a quiet place, a place of reflection. Take time to check in with how your body is feeling. Notice how you are supported by the chair you sit in, by the floor which grounds you. Let your attention rest on each part of your body, noticing if you are storing any tension there, if you need to stretch or shift to be more comfortable, or shrug your shoulders up and gently let them drop.

Pay attention to your breathing, noticing the quiet rhythm which sustains the body. Perhaps rest a hand on your heart to sense its beating, the marvellous ordinary stuff of life. What feelings are around for you today as you begin this time of reflection? Is there lightness in your heart, or heaviness? Bring a sense of compassion as you look at yourself, knowing that God looks upon you with compassion and love.

Can you be at ease in the presence of God today? Can you relax knowing that you are accepted here exactly as you are? Knowing that God values all the details of your life, and that God's ongoing creation of you is gradually drawing you nearer and nearer to your true self, the person you are in God's eyes. Is there anything you would like to say to God today? Anything you would like to ask God for?

In the quietness of this space, listen again to these mysterious words of Jesus: "Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." (John 12: 24)

What stands out to you, here?

Is there an insight, here, which relates to the story of Jesus?

Is there a word or a phrase here which speaks to the story of your own life?

Is there anything here which speaks to our world, as it is today?

Emily Dickinson wrote:

"Hope" is the thing with feathers -

That perches in the soul -

And sings the tune without the words -

And never stops - at all -

What brings you hope?

Take a moment to consider what lifts your heart when you feel the weight of the world, and all that is wrong with the world. What is it that reminds you, that transformation is possible, even when prospects look dark? Where do you go when you need to feel hopeful?

Like Emily Dickinson's thing with feathers, the things which give us hope are often small — or at least small compared with the situations which cause us to despair. But somehow that doesn't matter. A blackbird singing at dusk. A forget-me-not growing in a pavement crack. The smile of a loved one. The turning of a season. A seedling breaking through the soil. What are the bringers of hope in your life?

I'm going to read a passage by Macrina Wiederkehr about a few things she identifies, drawing on the arrival of spring on her childhood farm in Iowa. But you could do this anywhere in the world, any season:

When I was growing up there was a spring cry in our household that equalled the holiness of the antiphons and chants we sing in church. What shall I call it? A mantra? No, a mantra is too quiet... This was a cry of pure delight. It was more like a gospel, a heralding of good news. It was a proclamation of spring.

And this was the cry. The martins are back! The martins are back! This was the clock that told us that spring had returned. The swift purple martins would come in on wings of joy returning to their tall summer homes towering in the sky. Their return was the beginning of spring for us... It was a great homecoming. These swift circling birds of the swallow family brought much joy to my summer evenings. Their melodious trills filled my surroundings with music.

Just as joyful as the martins' return was the great blossoming that took place each spring. Mama always assured me that secrets hidden in the winter would surprise me in the spring; and she was right! About the time of the martins return, every bush and shrub, every flower, every blade of grass started telling the secret that was hidden in the hard crust

of winter's earth. And what was the secret? Ah! The secret was life. All the gardens stayed busy proclaiming the gospel of life.

When I think of spring I think of laughter. Resurrection. Renewal. Easter. Birth, Rebirth. A joyful return to life is made visible in a myriad of ways. Little growing things start sticking their heads out of the ground. How can one refrain from smiling at a crocus? I remember a little poem by Lilia Royers that I memorised on a happy spring day that is now somewhere in my heart's archives.

First a howling blizzard woke us,
and then the rain came down to soak us;
And now before our eye can focus,
CROCUS!

From *The Circle of Life*, Joyce Rupp &
Macrina Wiederkehr, Sorin Books, 2005

We might wonder what something as small as a crocus can do in a world as troubled as ours. It seems ridiculous to suggest that it can make any difference at all. Yet we know that crocuses, or songbirds, or seedlings do make a difference. It's as if they bring us some news about ourselves, or about God, which we need to hear. They help us, in some way, to keep going, and to keep being the bearer of light in a dark world. They connect us, in some way, with the bigger mystery which reminds us that transformation is always possible.

I'm going to close this reflection, and the series, by reading John O'Donoghue's *In Praise of Earth*. We began this series with earth, so this feels like an appropriate place to end, albeit this time looking at the whole planet, held in the hands of the Holy One.

In Praise of Earth

Let us bless
The imagination of the Earth,
That knew early the patience
To harness the mind of time,
Waited for the seas to warm,
Ready to welcome the emergence

Of things dreaming of voyaging
Among the stillness of land.

And how light knew to nurse
The growth until the face of the earth
Brightens beneath a vision of colour.

When the ages of ice came
And sealed the earth inside
An endless coma of cold,
The heart of the earth held hope,
Storing fragments of memory,
Ready for the return of the sun.

Let us thank the Earth
That offers ground for home
And holds our feet firm
To walk in space open
To infinite galaxies.

*

Let us salute the silence
And certainty of mountains:
Their sublime stillness,
Their dream-filled hearts.

The wonder of a garden
Trusting the first warmth of spring
Until its black infinity of cells
Becomes charged with the dream;
Then the silent, slow nurture
Of the seed's self, coaxing it
To trust the act of death.

The humility of the earth
That transfigures all
That has fallen
Of outlived growth.

The kindness of the earth,
Opening to receive
Our worn forms
into the final stillness.

Let us ask forgiveness of the earth
For all our sins against her:
For our violence and poisonings
Of her beauty.

*

Let us remember within us
The ancient clay;
Holding the memory of seasons,
The passion of the wind,
The fluency of water,
The warmth of fire,
The quiver-touch of the sun
And shadowed sureness of the moon.

That we may awaken,
To live to the full
The dream of the earth
Who chose us to emerge
And incarnate its hidden night
In mind, spirit and light.

(from *Benedictus: A Book of Blessings*, Bantam Press, 2007)

PART SIX
FURTHER REFLECTION MATERIAL

A tiny seed of possibility

When the first daffodil opens its golden flower, soon there will be many many more. The garden will be alive with them, the forests will be carpeted with trilliums and bluebells, Ottawa will become one huge tulip festival. Jesus told his friends that he was the first of many brothers and sisters, and that others would soon do what he did, and much more besides. He was the first harbinger of a new spiritual springtime...

After my conversation with the daffodils... I wanted to proclaim that God doesn't come down, God comes up! God is less like a comet that suddenly sweeps into our orbit from outer space, and more like a tiny seed of possibility that can grow into a universe, and is gestating in the same soil that gives birth to us...

Margaret Silf, *Roots and Wings*, Darton, Longman & Todd 2006

The everyday miracle

When I came to the farm (in February) there was very little to see in the way of colour save various shades of wood and grass. How it had changed near the end of May! That old story — that which was brown turning green...: an old story, differing from all other tales, from all art, from all tricks, in that though repeated every year, it still surprises me, still calls for applause and praise.

John Stewart Collis, *The Worm Forgives the Plough*

from 'We have walked so many times, my boy'

There are two healings: nature's
and ours and nature's. Nature's
will come in spite of us, after us,
over the graves of its wasters, as it comes
to the forsaken fields. The healing
that is ours and nature's will come
if we are willing, if we are patient,
if we know the way, if we will do the work.
My father's father, whose namesake
you are, told my father this, he told me,
and I am telling you: we make
this healing, the land's and ours:
it is our possibility. We make keep
this place, and be kept by it.
There is a mind of such an artistry
that grass will follow it,
and heal and hold, feed beasts
who will feed us and feed the soil.

Though we invite, this healing comes
in answer to another voice than ours;
a strength not ours returns
out of death beginning in our work.

Though the spring is late and cold,
though uproar of greed
and malice shudders in the sky,
pond, stream, and treetop raise
their ancient songs;
the robin molds her mud nest
with her breast; the air
is bright with breath
of bloom, wise loveliness that asks
nothing of the season but to be.

Wendell Berry



Reflection Exercise

The Parable of the Mustard Seed is another in the same group as the Sower and the Wheat and the Weeds. Everyone in Jesus' audience would have known what happens when you plant a mustard seed: they grow fast into comparatively low-lying bushes which spread rapaciously and can cover large areas. Certainly, birds would build their nests in them.

He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches." (Matthew 13:31-32)

Read the parable carefully. Can you imagine Jesus telling it? Can you see how the audience are reacting? Are they pleased to see him use a tree they all know well? Are they laughing at the hyperbole? How does this parable speak to us today? How does it speak to me in my circumstances?

Afterword

I guess it started with winter. I had created an Advent retreat about the treasures of darkness, Riches Stored in Secret Places. What happens in the dark? Well, gestation, for one thing. Bulbs and seeds put out roots and begin to grow. An embryo in a womb becomes a baby. Before we can see it, life begins.

Having thought long and hard about winter, it seemed natural to think about spring: a season where everything feels like it's beginning, when those shoots become flowers, the buds become leaves. That took me to the Sower.

The Parable suffers from being well known. I hope readers don't mind that I've taken it in some new directions, as well as delving into the other crop-related parables which are less well known. I suppose I'm enjoying asking awkward questions: what does growth look like? Why is it that sometimes we don't even notice it? What kind of Sower is this who casts seeds everywhere, even on the stony ground, even on the path? And what about that stony ground, can it bear fruit too?

I'm grateful to David Roberts, Margaret Silf, Macrina Wiederkehr and Joyce Rupp for their helpful insights, John Stewart Collis for writing so well about working the fields before farming became industrialised, and Derek Jarman for his memoir, *Modern Nature*, about creating his garden against the odds on the shingle at Dungeness. I've also learned a deal about weeds and much more about soil than I ever expected to.

Thank you, Carol Marples, for permission to use the seed pod image on the cover. The 'handfuls of earth' photograph is by Gabriel Jimenez on Unsplash. Original writing is ©Susan Mansfield, sources are acknowledged for all other materials.

I try to use non-gendered pronouns for God wherever possible; sometimes the Sower becomes "he" when the grammar demands it. Small differences may occur between the written text and audio versions of the reflections. These are minor and do not affect the wider meaning of the text. Thank you for ordering this retreat and may you be blessed on your journey.