

THE GIFT THAT KEEPS ON GIVING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

September 2019 (1 - 28 September)



At harvest time we are thankful for the gifts we have received — from the earth, from God, and from one another. We are going to link back to a past Sanctuary First theme *Guard the Good* and focus on a story Jesus told known as the 'Parable of the sower'. It's a punchy, memorable tale with lots to say about agriculture, gifts and grace.

We will be remembering the people and places that produce the food we rely on. We will think about sowing, protecting the crop, and harvesting in both a literal and metaphorical sense. Many of us have become disconnected from the gifts of the land, having become reliant on complex supply chains that alienate us from the process.

There's often a temptation in Christian communities to divide the 'spiritual' gifts of insight and discernment from the everyday 'giftedness' of reality. We might get a fuller appreciation of the spiritual gifts we have received from God if we see them as an integral part of the radical gift that is creation itself. Sometimes we put God in a box and say that the Creator is only responsible for the extraordinary or the 'supernatural' and that nature can keep going on its own, just ticking over — a system with no need of a caretaker: 'God gets on with spiritual stuff and leaves the rest to us.' But this is not the God of the prophets, or the Psalms, or the Gospels. God is intimately tied up with creation from what we consider 'everyday' to what we call 'extraordinary'. God is continually giving us gifts.

How do we get our heads around this generosity? How can we guard the good and take care of the gifts that have been given us? How can we nurture our gifts? But also, how do we explain the poisoned gifts — the crops that fail and the hardship and cruelty of our world? This harvest, let's ask one another — how do we respond to the gift that keeps on giving even in the face of ignorance, rejection and carelessness? And how can we treasure it?

THE GIFT THAT KEEPS ON GIVING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following discussion questions are designed to accompany the [THE GIFT THAT KEEPS ON GIVING Resource Pack](#) to help adapt the material for small group work. They are divided into 4 parts to correspond with the 4 weeks of the Daily Worship theme.

These questions are just a guideline and there is no need to go through all the given questions in a single session, or in the following sequence. Feel free to pick and choose, or adapt to what interests your group.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Part 1: Seeds fall...

Conversation Starter

Our theme centres around a story Jesus told known as 'The Parable of the Sower' (see references below). We will be returning to it several times in our Daily Worship. It's a metaphor about a farmer that tells us about how we receive (or don't receive) God and God's gifts.

This month we are going to think about gifts, both what we sometimes consider 'spiritual gifts' — the special insights God gives us, and at harvest time the 'gifts of the earth' — creation itself. The same God who gives us his Son and his Spirit, gives us the food we eat and the ground we walk on. It's all connected. Our God gives generously and sometimes in ways we struggle to understand.

Can you think of gifts that God has given you — personal, spiritual, (or edible!)...that you are grateful for? It might be talents you have, food you love to eat, pockets of creation you love to spend time in.... share with the group.

Read Mark 4: 1-9

Seeds are sown... setting the scene. Before thinking about the meaning of this parable — how does the story make you feel? What do you respond to? Is there a particular type of ground that you identified with or felt particularly sorry for? What do you think of the sower?

Read Mark 4: 10-20

An explanation... that invites further questions!

Why are people told parables so that they *won't* understand? What is Jesus getting at here?

Why does the sower sow the seeds so indiscriminately? Why doesn't he just sow in the good soil?

Read 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

The spiritual gifts that Paul talks about in this reading all come from the same source but take root in different ways, in different people. There is something organic in these gifts being unified in where they come from but diverse in how they are expressed. Like the seeds sown by the farmer in the parable, the gifts are given widely but are received individually in their own context.

In verse 7 Paul makes clear these gifts are for the common good. In a world when food is distributed so unequally how can we use our God-given gifts, such as those described in this reading, to guard the good gifts of the earth for the good of all?

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Part 2: Tending the seeds

Read Jeremiah 12:1-4

It's thought provoking to read these verses from an ecological perspective — linking the prospering of the guilty with the degradation of the environment — the treacherous thriving at the expense of the natural world. God has generously given us gifts of food, enough to feed everyone, and yet we spoil the land. Even our attempts to engineer our own 'good soil' have created monocultures which in themselves become unsustainable.

How long will the land mourn? Why do people get away with ruining the earth in search of profit while others starve?

How can we plant, grow and eat well so that there is enough for everyone?

Read Matthew 13: 1-23

How do we cultivate good soil? Both in a real and a figurative sense. The figurative soil of our lives in which the Word of the Kingdom can be planted and the literal soil where we can plant the gifts of the earth?

Can some of the ways we tend to literal seeds in the ground give us insights into how to tend to the seeds of the Kingdom?

In order to sustain a vast and varied food chain around the world a lot of effort has been put into producing turbo-charged 'good soil' to maximise the possible return. But some of these practices are damaging in the long run, harming the quality of the soil for short term gain. Do we do the same in our faith? And in both cases, how do we guard the good while embracing the diversity of God?

The words of **Psalm 139** are both deeply personal and deeply universal. A cry to a creator who knows us intimately and yet is vast beyond our understanding. It is striking that in the Parable of the Sower the sower casts seeds on good soil and bad soil alike — in receptive and hostile places — to a divine plan we can perhaps hardly grasp. One of the difficulties of being human is dealing with our own limited knowledge and trusting in the limitless knowledge of God. God knows everything about us — about the soil we're standing in, the thorns that threaten to choke us and the birds that circle above us. In Psalm 139 we discover we are profoundly *known*.

Read Psalm 139 — As a group (for those who want to participate, take turns reading one verse at a time, leaving a short pause between each verse, leaving space for reflection)

What words stuck out for you? What words (if any) comforted you?

What words (if any) challenged you? What words (if any) inspired you?

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Part 3: Rooting through the weeds

Conversation starter

In this section we are thinking particularly about stories, and returning to the story Jesus told of the Parable of the Sower (see Mark 4:1-20 in Part 1). Stories are a bit like seeds — something organic that takes root in different ways. You appreciate stories differently at different times in your life. Your mood, circumstances and imagination all affect how you hear the same story.

What are some of your favourite stories? What have stories taught you? Can you remember a particular story that was used to teach you something? (It might be a cherished family anecdote, a beloved novel, a nursery rhyme...).

Read Isaiah 6: 8-13

We saw in Parts 1 and 2 that Jesus made reference to Isaiah in his explanation as to why he used parables after telling the Parable of the Sower. It seems at first counter-intuitive that Jesus would speak in parables so that people **wouldn't** understand what he was saying. Surely stories are to help us *understand*? Why would the prophet Isaiah speak so that people **won't** see, so they **won't** understand?

For context — the people who Isaiah is speaking to are in a bad way, they are rebelling against God, giving into idolatry (worshipping things that aren't God) and dealing unjustly with one another. They are not taking care of the earth or the vulnerable.

Why would you tell someone a story that they wouldn't understand? At least not at first? What do you make of the 'holy seed' in verse 13?

Read 1 Timothy 1:12-17

Paul was hardly an example of 'good soil' was he? He was the agricultural equivalent of a slab of concrete, covered in barbed wire, in the middle of a desert. A hardhearted man actively going in the opposite direction from God. Why did the seed take root in Paul when he was far from being good soil? Why didn't God intervene in Paul's life earlier on before all the violence and persecution? Why was Paul allowed to persist in ignorance for so long?

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-24

Verse 19 contains a quirky, counter-intuitive statement (which links to Isaiah 29: 14). The Cross represents an incredible phenomenon — an act of failure as an act of success, a great loss as an ultimate triumph that confounds how we think things are meant to work. Are there conventional or popular wisdoms of our culture and our age that we need to let go of in order to live in Jesus's story? Things that people accept as true but that don't fit with God's plans for the world.

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Part 4: Treasuring the gift

If we want to protect both the gifts of the earth and the spiritual gifts that are entrusted to us we have to care for the soil they are planted in. We have to protect them from harmful forces: both from the environment and our own greed and selfishness. Intensive farming practices have allowed us to produce greater yields but some of our methods risk compromising the land for the future. Let's draw a link between fostering good soil for our crops and good soil for the seeds of our discipleship to grow so that we can continue to treasure the gifts that keep on giving.

Read Luke 8: 4-15

Farmers sometimes use scarecrows to protect their seeds from being eaten by birds. What 'scarecrows' can we use to protect the good soil of our life? Both in a figurative and literal sense — to protect the earth and to protect the good in our lives that can nurture our faith? It might be relevant to note that as a solution scarecrows are: cheap, impromptu, improvised and involve an element of recycling (made from old clothes). Can we use these elements in our scarecrows?

Read Psalm 113

Almighty God has great compassion for the poor and needy. Let's guard against confusing 'good soil' with 'comfortable material circumstances'. Everyone is entitled to a good quality of life but cultivating good soil is not about building up our own material comforts — it's about receiving God's Word which is not dependent on superficial amenities, it can happen equally in a comfy sofa or on an ash heap. Just because we are financially secure or comfortable it doesn't mean that we are in good soil for the Kingdom to grow. In fact sometimes the more comfortable or stable our circumstances — the thornier the ground is for God's Word to take root.

How can we guard against such complacency? From thinking that *people who are materially comfortable must be spiritually sound* — and that *people who are struggling in life must in some sense be to blame spiritually for it*? Both of these beliefs are damaging. And how do we make sense of the people who end up in 'bad soil' through no fault of their own?

Read 1 Corinthians 14: 26-33

When we share the gifts we have received from God we should plant them in good soil and ensure that they are for building up the church (see v26) and not allow them to get caught up in the weeds and thorns of arrogance, pomposity and vanity. The picture Paul gives here is of an organic process — of people sharing gifts and cultivating them for the growth of all — advocating for a peaceful diversity.

How can we plant the gifts God gives us to ensure peace and respectful free expression?

Do you feel your gifts are planted well? Are there ways you could better plant the seeds you have been given for the common good?