

THE GIFT THAT KEEPS ON GIVING



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.

As part of our reflections 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?

Each week of the theme runs Sunday-Saturday and has its own subtheme, which contains daily Bible readings and thought triggers. As well as drawing from the lectionary, the readings this month are also drawn from our past 'Guard The Good' theme.

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Seeds fall... (01 September)

We begin our theme with Mark's version of *The Parable of the Sower*. 'Broadcasting' is originally a term from agriculture describing a process of scattering seeds over a large area to maximise your potential harvest. The sower in the parable doesn't restrict the seeds to one special location — they are sown far and wide to take root in whatever land will have them.

This agricultural process gives us a beautiful glimpse of what's hard to grasp — the scale of God's generosity. The word of the Kingdom is given to us generously as seeds. It would seem there is something organic about this gift, it is something that must take root and be nurtured. And if we choose to receive the gift it will keep on giving. It's abundantly given but not imposed on us against our will.

God's seeds continue to fall, sometimes we reject that generosity and sometimes we embrace it.

1. **Mark 4: 1-9**
 1. **Seeds are sown...** setting the scene. Before thinking about interpreting the meaning of this parable — how does the story make you feel? What do you respond to?
2. **Mark 4: 10-20**
 2. **Seeds are sown...** An explanation... that invites further questions!
3. **Jeremiah 2: 4-13**
 3. **Cracked cisterns!** Rejecting God's generosity and making poor substitutes.
4. **Psalm 81:1, 10-16**
 4. **Missing out on 'honey from the rock'.** Not listening to God's voice.
5. **Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16**
 5. **Cultivating the seeds.** The importance of sharing and hospitality.
 6. **Being open.** Modelling humility and generosity.
6. **Luke 14:1, 7-14**
 7. **Unity and diversity.** The Gifts of the Holy Spirit - all from the same source but taking root in different ways. Again, something organic in these gifts being unified in origin but diverse in expression.
7. **1 Corinthians 12: 1-11**

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Tending the seeds (08 September)

How can we nourish the seeds that are planted? We return to the Parable of the Sower, looking at Matthew's version and this time we want to dig in to the agricultural metaphor (see what we did there?). What can food production teach us about faith, and what can faith teach us about food production?

Many of us are now alienated from the gifts of the land, relying on complex production chains to deliver us food from all over the world. In order to sustain a hungry global population we have given up on broadcasting and instead have doubled down on targeting our food production in carefully calibrated 'good soil', but this creates monocultures which in themselves become unsustainable. How do we tend effectively to our seeds without creating harmful monocultures? And how do we do the same in our faith? How do we guard the good while embracing the diversity of God?

- 1. Matthew 13: 1-23**
 - 1. How do we keep on our guard?** Protecting the seeds against that which would snatch or strangle them but also against the subtler thorns and crows of complacency, conformity and constriction? What if in the name of cultivating supercharged 'good soil' we ignore God's will and become reliant on our own abilities, both in nature and in our lives.
- 2. Jeremiah 12: 1-4**
 - 2. How long will the land mourn?** It's interesting to read verse 4 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.
- 3. Jeremiah 18:1-11**
 - 3. A God of new beginnings.** Do we trust the potter to throw out the old clay? To remould us?
- 4. Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18**
 - 4. We owe our very existence to God.** How do we tend to the gift of life that God has given us?
- 5. Deuteronomy 30:15-20**
 - 5. Choosing life.** Accepting the gift and not getting caught up in the thorns.
- 6. Psalm 1**
 - 6. Guard the good!** Take root, seek nourishment!
- 7. Philemon 1:1-21**
 - 7. Refreshing one another...** Transformative relationships in a new world order.

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Rooting through the weeds (15 September)

Stories can be handy teaching aids, especially when trying to grasp something which is hard to convey in a list of facts. We tend to make sense of the world around us through stories: narratives that explain how we have got to now. Stories are often (though not always) memorable, entertaining and thought provoking. They tend to stay with us longer than dry lists and schematics.

But stories are organic, often taking on a life of their own. On top of the original story is how that story is heard by the listener; the associations they bring to it. When told to picture a sower with his seeds we will all picture something slightly different. The story will take root in different ways. We saw in week 1 & 2 that Jesus made reference to Isaiah in his explanation as to why he used parables. 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? Well it would seem so in the long run, but sometimes they make us scratch our heads — they set up a mystery. Perhaps for us to truly receive the gifts of God they have to be handed over to us freely to make of them what we will. For us to understand a story fully we have to make it our own, exposing it to our confusion, ignorance and prejudices along the way. It could be important that we don't just take it at face value — but instead that we travel with it and let us shape us.

As discussed in previous weeks there is something *organic* about the gifts we receive from God. It could be that for something to *really take root* we have to puzzle over it, we have to enter into the mystery and then respond ourselves. Not every seed will take root, not every story will grab us. We will make mistakes, sometimes we will get lost in the weeds — but the seeds will keep coming and keep multiplying and as we wrestle with it we continue to learn.

1. Isaiah 6: 8-13
 2. Numbers 21:4-9
 3. Jeremiah 4:11-28
 4. Psalm 14
 5. Exodus 32:7-9
 6. 1 Timothy 1:12-17
 7. 1 Corinthians 1:18-24
1. **Setback, confusion, overhaul...** Somehow all part of the journey, the bigger story?
 2. **Weeds growing...** Poisonous complaining. A healing focus.
 3. **A startling vision of desertification.** The consequences of wickedness on the natural world, but in verse 27 there is a note of hope.
 4. **A psalm of frustration, consternation and longing.** One of the amazing things about the Bible, and the psalms in particular, is how they tap into such a wide range of human emotions; the Bible is a collection of writing in conversation with itself capturing diverse lived human experience as the ongoing story unfolds.
 5. **Stiff necked people!** When have we been stiff-necked and decided to go our own way, to ignore God's gifts and instead build our own golden calves?
 6. **Seeds can survive and thrive against the odds, even in poor ground.** Jesus is patient with Paul who takes a long time to come round.
 7. **Confounding simplistic easy answers?** Another counter-intuitive and counter-cultural text, that invites us to dig in, to go deeper into the mystery. This month we have been thinking about gifts, maybe it's not until the gift is unwrapped —not until we start to experience it — that we begin to understand it.

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Treasuring the gift (22 September)

In order to treasure the gifts of God — to give them time to take root — we have to guard the good. Our past theme Guard the Good used the imagery of scarecrows to remind us “we must guard against those ideas and actions that would rob us of our potential as People of God.” If we want to protect both the gifts of the earth and the gifts of the Spirit that are entrusted to us we have to care for the soil they are planted in. We have to protect it 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.

1. Luke 8: 4-15
 1. **Have you got ears to hear?** How do we plant our gifts in good soil? How do we find good soil and how do we protect it to keep it good? What are the scarecrows we could use to protect it?
2. Jeremiah 8:18 - 9:1
 2. **The harvest is past...** A profound expression of grief and loss. Part of guarding the good is honestly lamenting what has been lost.
3. Psalm 79: 1-9
 3. **A cry for compassion!** Vulnerable people looking for protection.
 4. **Do not deal falsely,** guard against such manipulative and abusive behaviour or you may well reap what you sow.
4. Amos 8: 4-7
 5. **Take heart!** Almighty God has great compassion for the poor and needy. Let’s guard against conflating ‘good soil’ with ‘comfortable material circumstances’. Of course we want everyone to have a good quality of life but cultivating good soil is not about fostering superficial amenities — its about a receiving God’s word which is not dependent on material comforts, it can happen equally in a comfy sofa or on an ash heap.
5. Psalm 113
 6. **Guarding the gifts.** 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 hubris, 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.
6. 1 Corinthians 14: 26-33
 7. **Being shrewd in guarding the gift.** And so we close on another parable which again seems counter-intuitive and counter-cultural...A dishonest steward is held up as an example of drive and ingenious problem solving! Sometimes we are called to be canny in our work of guarding the good! At times we may need to experiment, improvise and think on our feet in order to properly treasure the gifts that have been given us — in the earth and in our hearts.
7. Luke 16: 1-13
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