

My Father, The Gardener

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

April 2020 (29 March - 2 May)



As we head into Holy Week and Easter we will consider the generosity of our God who wants us to flourish. God doesn't just want us to survive — we have been created to grow, develop and blossom — rooted in love, branches of the true vine. Over the previous month ([What We Really Need](#)) and this one we are on a journey **Beginning to Flourish** with God and one another, exploring how the Ultimate Gardener finds us where we are — whatever soil we are in — and nourishes us tenderly.

God has given us within ourselves, within our friendships, within our communities, within our world — the means to live, and to live productively and creatively. Who we are and the choices we want to make matter. We are not just cogs in a machine or workers in a hive. We are individual and idiosyncratic. There has never been and there never will be someone just like you with your combination of personality and experience and genetics.

You are a unique creation and God wants you to live but also to feel fulfilled in that life — able to blossom into the fullest version of you.

From the shoots that grow in and amongst the rubble and hard ground of desperate need to the copious fruit of the groaning branches of the overflowing vineyard, our God cares for us and nurtures us.

The journey can be seasonal and cyclical with times of growth and then times of pruning back. We might flourish for a time before finding ourselves back to first principles for a season. There will be times of bearing fruit and times of lying fallow. But through it all our Father the Gardener never abandons us, caring despite everything so that we survive, thrive and flourish, even becoming apprentice gardeners ourselves.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Over the weeks we will explore:

- *Gardener and Baker* — considering the Bread of Life
- *Wine of the Spirit* — exploring the enlivening gift of the Holy Spirit
- *Jesus the Vine* — becoming branches ourselves
- *Apprentice Gardeners* — our invitation to play our part in the garden
- *Flourishing Together* — reflecting on living so that all may flourish

This is the second part of a two part theme sequence 'Beginning to Flourish'; Part 1, starting 1 March is [What We Really Need](#).

The following discussion questions are designed to accompany the [My Father, The Gardener Resource Pack](#) to help adapt the material for small group work. They are divided into 5 parts to correspond with the 5 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: Gardener and Baker

Conversation Starter

'Wine, with its clear ties to the lifecycle of plants, its ability to evolve and change (to grow) and its delicate fragility in the face of danger (TCA, oxygen, light), fairly screams "alive." In today's overly sanitised, automated world, could our wine be more alive – perhaps even more 'human' – than us?'

So writes Courtney Cochran a wine enthusiast. But if wine is a metaphor for life so is bread. For it is also alive and evolving, moving from dough to the finished article; and bread like the vine begins its life planted in the ground. Jesus' choice of bread and wine as the symbols he wished to be remembered by are rich in meaning to explore. Both need time to mature and grow into something that looks completely different from what is planted.

Have you ever tried making bread, if so how did it go? As well as taking time to mature and develop — what are other things that human beings and loaves of bread have in common?

Read Romans 8: 11

The most common yeast generally associated with winemaking is *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* which is also used in bread making. Do you think the way Paul describes the Holy Spirit could be likened to spiritual yeast working in the background bringing life and vitality to the human heart?

How can we become more aware of this process happening in our lives? See if you can think of specific examples of feeling enlivened by the Spirit, the active agent within.

Read John 6: 47-51

What does it mean to **believe** in Jesus?

How do you eat the bread of life? Is it literal or figurative?

Read 1 Kings 17: 7-16

Can you think of a time when resources have lasted a lot longer than common sense would suggest?

Does God, the Gardener and Baker, intervene literally to give us our daily bread?

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Part 2: Wine of the Spirit (Holy Week)

Conversation Starter

It may seem strange to some to speak of the Holy Spirit during Holy Week. However it is important to understand that the person of the Holy Spirit in Scripture is understood to be at the very centre of the healing and reconciling power of the crucifixion of Jesus.

Some have interpreted the passage in John 19:31 where it says, "When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished!' Then he bowed his head and gave up the Spirit" to mean he breathed out his Spirit into the world. The Spirit's gift of healing and forgiveness is a costly love. While others see it as the cry of completion; declaring the finished work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in redeeming the world. Either way the Holy Spirit is the one who reveals the meaning of the cross to each individual person. Take time to visualise the meaning of love and sorrow meeting at a point in history for you. To reconcile you to your true Father.

The important thing to note as we consider the meaning of the death of Jesus is that we do so from the perspective of 'My Father the Gardener'. The death of Jesus brings to life the work of the Holy Spirit — the yeast in the dough of humanity. Three days of waiting struggling and then victory! Death is defeated! God the Father has a new creation, a new Adam, Jesus the first fruits. He is the new wine, the bread of life 'proven'. Like yeast makes dough rise so the Spirit causes him to rise and bring new life into our world. We cannot begin to understand the implications of Holy Week unless we view the story of the cross from the perspective of the Resurrection.

What words come to mind when you think of the Holy Spirit?

Read Matthew 26: 26-30

There was a symbolism in the phrase 'He Took a cup' which Matthew knew would speak volumes to the Jewish community. At Passover there are always four cups on the table. The Four Cups represent the four expressions of deliverance promised by God in **Exodus 6: 6-7**: "I will bring out", "I will deliver", "I will redeem", and "I will take."

Take some time to talk through the meaning that you see in these four cups for our lives today: What are we being *brought out to* or where are we being *delivered to* in our lives at the moment? What needs to be *redeemed*? Where do we need to be *taken*? Are there other cups that we too have to take and drink from if we are to follow Jesus?

Read John 19: 30

So literally Jesus took the sour wine offered by the soldiers and in doing so he took the bitter cup of humanity's shame and brokenness. Often in life there are actions and rituals that help to underline the magnitude of an event. What do you think Jesus meant when he said "it is finished"?

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Part 2: Wine of the Spirit (Holy Week) [CONTINUED]

Read Ephesians 5: 18-20

Here is an interesting twist. Paul reminds the Christians in Ephesus to make sure they are never drunk with the wine. They must look beyond the symbol to the reality — Jesus. It is the Sign of the Spirit at work in their lives that truly matters. When one is filled or intoxicated by the Spirit it leads to much joy and happiness.

So what is the difference between a symbol of something and a sign of something? (check out Len Sweet's introduction at the 2019 Re-imagining Church Conference).

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Part 3: Jesus the Vine (Easter!)

Conversation Starter

Every day is Easter Sunday for the Christian. Adam the first human according to the poem in Genesis was first created in a garden. Now on this first Easter Sunday in a garden we learn a new concept. We who have the Spirit of God working like yeast within us, will one day be resurrected after death. The resurrection of Jesus is the new beginning for humanity. He becomes the new Adam and we find ourselves once again with Mary feeling the breath of the Holy Spirit, revealing to us a new future.

As the Holy Spirit continues to work in our lives — what does the future hold for you this Easter?

Read John 20: 15- 16

There is something interesting going on here in this conversation between Mary and Jesus. This month we have been considering God as Gardener, so check out verse 15: the son of the Gardener is mistaken for the gardener! Only Mary doesn't realise the profundity of her assumption. At another level it all becomes clear to her when Jesus calls her by her name.

Here's a question who then do you think Jesus is? The question is a loaded one we know. If we had phrased it, 'Who do you think Jesus **was**?' it would be in the past tense, meaning perhaps an historical character.

So is Jesus an '**is**' or a '**was**'? Is he alive today or an interesting historical figure? If he is an '**is**' can he call you by name today, and if he did would you recognise his voice?

Read Hosea 14: 8-9

What an amazing passage this is. It points to the compassion and tenderness of God towards his creation. God is not a product of the human imagination or an idol made with human hands. He is the master designer, the gardener tending the beauty of his creation.

When you hear words like 'God wants you to flourish' what does that mean to you? Wealth and success? Something else? What does it mean to be nurtured and cared for by God? How does God the gardener manage his garden? You may want to check out John 15.

Read Leviticus 19: 10

We often want to maximise profit, efficiency, and extraction of natural resources at the expense of those resources and of one another. God challenges us to see things in a different way. What are the principles that should guide the way we use the limited natural resources in the world?

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Part 3: Jesus the Vine (Easter!) [CONTINUED]

How can we support those in developing countries who depend on harvesting the resources of the natural world, (so that they can survive), to do so without destroying the earth's eco system?

What changes to our lifestyles are required to produce a more equitable world?

Have you ever considered the opportunities available to use your skills in a developing country?

My Father, The Gardener

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Part 4: Apprentice gardeners

Conversation Starter

Our Father the Gardener, invites us to be apprentice gardeners — helping one another to flourish. We have contributions to give — working for hope, restoration and righteousness alongside our Father the Ultimate Gardener.

During this week we will be highlighting the work of the **Vine Trust**, (www.vinetrust.org) in helping some of the most marginalised people in our world begin to flourish. This year is its 35th Anniversary. When Albert first established the Trust along with a few others, little did they think God would take that little branch of the vine, known as 'Branches' and grow it into what it is today.

Today the Trust offers opportunities for individuals to practice being God's 'apprentice gardeners' in the Peruvian Amazon and in Tanzania. This week we will be focusing on what it might mean for more members of our Sanctuary First Community to begin to connect with the Trust and share their skills and resources. But we also hope that we will be open to the many alternative areas of service that God brings across our paths from day to day.

What are ways you can be an apprentice gardener for God, working in the world — God's garden, in your normal everyday life?

Read Amos 9: 14

Too often as Christians we read the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures in such a way that we spiritualise their prophecies. So we look at this passage in Amos and relate it to spiritual growth. We believe that God will restore and build his coming Kingdom. But what if God is calling us to help to build a more equitable world here and now? The Vine Trust is currently in the process of building a village in partnership with the African Inland Mission Church to give homes to some of the poorest and marginalised people in East Africa — Children who have been orphaned by the dreaded AIDS Virus. The Trust supplies the funds and the volunteers to go and be labourers to local builders. Read more on the Trust's website about the medical ships that serve in the Amazon and Lake Victoria.

Is this the sort of thing you could do? Do you know someone else who could who you could support? What are other ways we can help make these ancient words a contemporary reality?

Read Isaiah 61: 11

If God only has our hands to do the gardening in his world. How can we begin to be the agents enabling others to see their gifts to grow in God's garden?

Could it be that areas of God's garden lie untended because we have failed to encourage others to get involved in creating and growing fruit bearing plants in the rich soil of God's love and grace? How can we spur one another on?

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Part 4: Apprentice gardeners [CONTINUED]

Read Ephesians 3: 16-21

So why is it that Christians are often found at the forefront of the fight for social and economic justice for the poor and marginalised? The answer of course is found in the passage we have just read. It is the love of Christ constrains us to become involved.

Having read these passage what is it that you are being inspired to attempt to do for the glory of God?

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Part 5: Flourishing Together

As we work as apprentice gardeners we find that in the flourishing of one another we are nourished, in the nurturing of our neighbour, we ourselves blossom too.

Read Luke 13: 18

Never despise the day of small things. We love the passage in the Living Bible from the book of Zechariah 4:10 "Do not despise these small beginnings, for the LORD rejoices to see the work begin, to see the plumb line in Zerubbabel's hand."

So what is the small thing you are starting? Have you got your phone in your hand ready to start recruiting? If it is still only an idea why not share it? Ideas flourish together...

Read Philippians 4: 1

In today's busy world of instant achievement we often don't leave enough time for others around us to flourish. Flourishing takes time. And it requires nourishment and encouragement.

What are the qualities required of a community, or a family, or an individual that wants to flourish?

Read Luke 10: 25-37

We began this two theme sequence thinking about **What We Really Need** so that from that basis we could consider what it means to flourish. In order for the Samaritan to flourish he had to open himself up to the essential needs of the man on the side of the road. That wounded, abandoned, shaken soul needed to get his breath back, to have something to drink, to be given a shelter and be restored to a community. So that's exactly what the Samaritan did. And those are the same things all us wounded, abandoned, shaken souls need.

And the Samaritan's actions are our instruction, "do likewise."

How do the words of Jesus , "Go and do likewise" make you feel? How can we go about doing "likewise" in our day to day life?