

My Father, The Gardener

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 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. 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.

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

Each week of the theme runs Sunday-Saturday and has its own subtheme, which contains daily Bible readings and thought triggers. This is the second part of a two part theme sequence 'Beginning to Flourish'; Part 1, starting 1 March is [What We Really Need](#).

Gardener and Baker... (29 March)

This week we are going to think about the Bread of Life. Bread is hugely important throughout history and across the world, in various forms. It is both an everyday staple and a special symbol of sustenance itself. This week we will look at some instances of bread being mentioned in the Bible but we will also consider the process of bread making alongside other passages to look for areas of overlap. Just as bread is worked and proved and animated — so are we. Bread is a metaphor. Bread is a story. But bread is of course also — food.

1. Ezekiel 37:1-14

2. Psalm 130

3. Romans 8: 6-11

4. John 11:1-44

5. John 6: 25-40

6. John 6: 47-59

7. 1 Kings 17: 7-16

1. **Add a little yeast.** The breath of God causes dry bones to rise, like how a live culture causes dough to rise when making bread.

2. **Waiting for the new rising...** Bakers 'prove' their bread, giving time for the yeast to do its work. The time of anticipation while you wait can be nerve-racking as each prove is an organic process. The baker has to step back and let go, trusting the process. Is 'proving' a skill we could cultivate in other parts of our lives?

3. **The active agent within.** Without the fizz and pop of a live yeast culture, and the skilled hands of a baker, bread is somewhat... flat. As leavened bread is enlivened so are we — by the Spirit.

4. **Unstoppable life.** *Sourdough* is a traditional bread making method where some of the batch is held back each time you bake so that loaves of bread can be 'resurrected' again and again using this 'starter' as the rising agent for the next loaf. It is an organic process that is a testament to the irrepressible persistence of life. The sourdough can keep on growing and developing, bringing new life, often intensifying in flavour. Perhaps when Lazarus came back he was subtly different, still Lazarus but *more so*... When Jesus works resurrection in our lives he gives us the time and space to grow and develop into *more of who we are*...

5. **I am.** 'For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.'

6. **The Bread of Life.** Reflecting on the bittersweetness of breaking bread in Communion.

7. **Something to eat.** Bread itself is an everyday miracle — keeping people alive and bringing them together.

Wine of the Spirit (Holy Week, 5 April)

As we enter Holy Week we move from thinking about bread to thinking about wine. Our Father the Ultimate Gardener makes bread from the produce of his garden but he is also a winemaker. We will think about the wine of Communion, the wine of suffering, the wine of celebration, and the Wine of the Spirit given to us so that we may flourish.

1. Psalm 104:
10-15
 1. **Gladdening the heart.** Wine, oil and bread — three of the most significant substances in the Bible redolent in meaning — gifted to us by our generous Father.
2. Proverbs 3:
9-10
 2. **Honouring God.** Giving back to God through sharing with others for the good of all.
3. Acts 2: (1-11)
12-32
 3. **A new wine?** The promise of the Holy Spirit.
 4. **New wine in new wineskins.** Preserving the wine.
4. Matthew 9:
14-17
 5. **Then he took a cup.** Wine as sacrifice.
 6. **The sour wine of Good Friday.** Contemplating Jesus's final drink before he gave up his spirit.
5. Matthew 26:
26-30
 7. **An intoxicating spirit.** In the tension of 'Holy Saturday', between the sadness of Good Friday and the celebration of Easter Sunday — we are reminded that we don't have to drown our sorrows. Jesus has died but he has also been resurrected and we have been given the Spirit's power to sustain us, even through sombre times of reflection.
6. John 19:
28-30
7. Ephesians 5:
18-20

Jesus the Vine (Easter Sunday, 12 April)

As we look around the garden this month with our Father God the Gardener — let's look at the vine that runs through everything and the branches that reach out widely under the rising and the setting of the sun.

1. John 20: 1-18
 2. Jeremiah 31: 1-6
 3. John 15: 1-11
 4. John 15: 12-17
 5. Hosea 14
 6. Matthew 20: 1-16
 7. Leviticus 19: 10
1. **'Supposing him to be the gardener..'** How often do we miss Jesus? When we're looking for fireworks and bolts of lightning do we miss the quiet presence of Jesus taking care of the garden, tending the branches of the vine?
 2. **'Again you shall plant vineyards'.** Enjoying the fruit!
 3. **'I am the vine'.** If Jesus is the vine and we are the branches — we are in some sense an extension of the divine, our lives are a human outworking of God's Kingdom and heavenly purpose.
 4. **Loving branches.** Following immediately on from the previous section, Jesus calls us to love one another as he has loved us. We are loving branches of his vine, reaching ever outwards.
 5. **An evergreen God.** The Ultimate Gardener wants us to flourish like a garden and blossom like a vine.
 6. **Challenging our perception of 'fair'.** When branches start looking suspiciously at other branches on the vine...
 7. **Respecting the vineyard.** 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.

Apprentice Gardeners (19 April)

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 the Ultimate Gardener.

1. Psalm 16
 2. 1 Peter 1: 3-9
 3. John 20:
19-23
 4. Amos 9: 14
 5. Isaiah 61: 11
 6. Ephesians 3:
16-21
 7. Jeremiah 31:
12
1. **Following the path of life.** Navigating the garden.
 2. **Into a living hope.** Living and working in the light of our imperishable inheritance.
 3. **Empowered by the Holy Spirit.** As Jesus was sent so are his disciples.
 4. **Our God of restoration.** Where can we plant gardens and vineyards and rebuild ruins?
 5. **Shoots of righteousness.** As earthly gardeners we can't make the shoots themselves grow but we can work to cultivate an environment where they can take root and blossom.
 6. **Rooted in love.** The importance of remembering our roots in love.
 7. **Cultivating life.** What does a life that is like a well watered garden look like? And what can we do to water the garden?

Flourishing together (26 April)

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.

1. Acts 2:14a, 36-41
 2. Psalm 116: 12-19
 3. 1 Peter 1: 17-23
 4. Leviticus 19: 34
 5. Luke 13: 18-19
 6. Philippians 3:17-4:1
 7. Luke 10: 25-36
1. **Cutting straight to the heart of it.** Getting to the heart of the matter.
 2. **In service to God.** A response of gratitude.
 3. **What does it mean to love one another deeply from the heart?** Being born anew.
 4. **Thriving together.** Seeing one another not as a threat but as an opportunity for blessing.
 5. **God's Kingdom is somewhere you can make a nest.** Considering nesting with God.
 6. **Helping one another to stand firm.** Citizens of Heaven working together.
 7. **Coming full circle.** 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."