Plant seeds of compassion, tolerance, hope and love

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Lent 3 C : Isa 55 1-9, Ps 63 1-9, Cor 10 1-13, Lk 13 31-35

Yesterday was special day in the children's garden. It was lovely to have a small-scale project and so many willing people working together to make new gardens. There's something life-giving about getting your hands in the soil together with new friends. Our new soil is wonderfully smelly. Darren wanted it ready to plant things in so they'd start growing straight away. Soil is a very precious thing, it's just about the most endangered resource on Earth.

Why am I talking about soil on the third Sunday of Lent? Because it's mentioned in today's readings. It's not very obvious amongst all the other words we've read about water, baptism and thirst. But in the second verse of the Psalm, we all read *My soul thirsts for you, my flesh longs for you* ***as a dry and thirsty land*** *where no water is*. The word translated as land – □□□□□□ (erets) – has lots of meanings, just like the English word does. It can also mean earth or country or territory or piece of ground or soil. So we could just as easily have said, *My soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you, like* ***dry and weary soil*** *where there is no water*.

What do we make of this image – of our soul and body being like soil that needs God as the water and warmth to bring life to us? I've always tended to think of myself more as a plant. There's plenty of Biblical imagery encouraging me to think like that, particularly the parables of the weeds and tares, and that one about the sower. And the Bible also tells me I'm meant to bear fruit. So I've thought I may be a bit like a pot plant on a window ledge; needing water and regular turning on

my saucer to make sure I grow straight.

But this verse from Psalm 63 challenges me with another image. The Psalmist talks of us being like land; soil. So this Psalm calls me to think of another story – the one about the first human that God formed from the dust of the Earth. That story calls us children or substance of Earth – □□□□□ (adam – 'human') – because ultimately we are all made from Earth – □□□□□□□ (adamah – 'ground / soil').

Maybe if you haven't spent your life thinking of yourself as a pot plant like I seem to have, this won't sound like a revolutionary idea. But think about it for a moment. You're not like a geranium or a pot of chives; you're more like part of their life-source. Soil – and dust mixed with water and sunlight can bring forth new life.

There's connectedness in all this – there's partnership. We've grown up with images of God as light and warmth and water and grace, and these still hold good. And now we can imagine ourselves responding to God like soil does to light and warmth and water. We're in an utterly surprising partnership here. Lowly dirt bathed in light and water and there's life. We see it every day, but we may not sense it in us – you and me bathed in grace – we produce life.

In verse three, we find that the Psalmist has somehow experienced this dazzling connectedness in the temple; in the house of God. And the rest of the Psalm is all about a determination to hold onto this vision in every corner of our life. There's wholeness, exaltation, security, intimacy and joy – life in all its fulness – in this experience. This Psalmist bathes in the light and the warmth; eats and drinks the elixir of the Divine, and then rests in God, in the meditations of the night watches.

How do *we* find our way to rest in God – to soak up the nourishment God longs to give us, so that we bring forth

living growth that is strong and supple and secure? What sorts of things *are* that sunlight and warmth and cool water and grace to our bodies and souls? One of my mentors early in my ministry used to find that access to God in the act of painting. Very early each morning, instead of praying with words and silences, quiet time with God happened with paint and a canvas.

I know lots of us find time in the garden is time with God; and maybe that's why the plant metaphor has always seemed such a rich image to me. But just after the Psalmist gave us the soil as an image of us and our connectedness, there came another one of finding God's presence in the Temple – in God's house – together with God's people – seeking together a nearness to God.

But it doesn't work automatically. Remember Jesus's lament over Jerusalem this morning. So how can we connect? How should we find a connectedness with the divine together? There's * something in us that seems to call out for that connection – a part of us that resonates with the spirituality of the Psalm. How do *we* embody that? And when we've found it, how do we look after it? How do we make sure we get the light and water, the warmth and the occasional turn we need to flourish? How do we do it? Do we know how, or does it happen by chance? How do we know when something in us connects us with the divine? * Something in us …

A few possibilities; does this spiritual part of you sneak up on you when certain pieces of music play; when you're with someone you love; when you're in a very special place, or when you catch a whiff of some familiar scent? It is there; that part of you; isn't it. The Psalmist sings its song; Isaiah proclaims its transcendence, and Jesus cries out to it with the indignant passion of its Creator feeling ignored. In Jesus's cries, we can hear God calling us to join with the light, the warmth and the grace so we can play our part in the gift of inner life. God is calling us to be to a community of

creation; soil – co-workers with God the on-going work of creation.

Finally, it's important to remember that the scriptures which have guided this morning's meditation come from communities; not individuals. They come from communities; they were written for communities, and they have belonged to communities like ours throughout the thousands of years of their history. I hope it sets you free on this Lenten pilgrimage of ours to know that whatever God calls you to, you're not called to go it alone. Wherever we find ourselves opting for lone-ranger spirituality, we're headed for grief. No, the wonderful thing; the humbling thing; is that *we* are called to be the *people of God*: a living organism, co-creators of life and love, nourished by warmth and cool water and grace; life-givers.

We started Lent with ashes and the words, dust thou art. Let's turn our attention to the potential that we creatures of dust – soil – can have in the hand of God. Amen

Just as an afterword to this sermon, I was at an interfaith gathering last Sunday evening to pray together for the people of Christchurch. At one point, a dear friend who is a Buddhist member of that organisation used an expression which made particular sense to me after that morning's sermon on us being like soil.

She talked of our role as being to 'plant seeds of compassion, tolerance, hope and love' in order that communities might become safer and more nurturing to everyone.

The sermon focussed on us being the soil that God tends in order that life might spring forth – so the main image was us as co-creators. But the idea that we might plant such precious, transforming seeds in the soil of others' hearts and minds takes the image to a wonderful new level. I find in this an exciting call to us as God's instruments of peace and love.