Ordination Talk Wells Sept 2021

In 1964, 2 Australian researchers coined a new scientific term – “Petrichor”. Petrichor is the term used to describe the smell of soil after rain. It is derived from the Greek for stone or rock – Petros (Jesus renaming Peter) and “Ichor” which means ‘the fluid that flows in the veins of the gods’ – wouldn’t that be a great name for a cider or beer!

The smell is produced by a molecule formed by streptomyces – a type of mycobacteria in the soil- from the same group of bacteria used to create commercial antibiotics. We humans are very sensitive to Petrichor – we can detect it in 1 part per million – it is a scent sought after by perfumers. God has made us to form a strong positive connection with the smell of rain on dry soil because it indicated the end of the dry season leading to an increased chance of crops growing and, hence, of survival. This action produces a natural anti-depressant – it stimulates serotonin production (the relaxed and happy hormone). 2 weeks ago, on the 20th anniversary of 9/11 I heard an interview with a survivor of the Twin Towers attack. She said that even now, 20 years later, the one time her anxiety disappears is when she is working in the garden – with her hands in the soil.

One of my favourite quotes about soil is from the American commentator – Paul Harvey. He said that “Man, despite his artistic pretensions, his sophistication, and his many accomplishments – owes his existence to a six inch layer of topsoil – and the fact that it rains”

So why all this talk about soil? We’re here in the Cathedral for this auspicious, reverend occasion, so shouldn’t I be talking about God, Jesus and Holy things?

Well firstly, as you’ve probably already guessed, I’m no learned theologian. I’m a farmer so I’m going to talk about something that I’m more familiar with. Secondly, as far as I can make out, when Jesus was talking to people he talked quite a bit about soil, and growing things and sheep. He made reference to everyday things that people saw around them – sometimes saying (as we heard in our reading ) “This is what the Kingdom of God is like”, or he would tell them a parable and leave a thought hanging – for people to think about and join the dots. You see, it’s a real privilege to be a Christian and a farmer because not only do I get to work with God’s amazing creation every day, but I have a head start when it comes to joining the dots with some of the parables.

So please, humour me whilst I talk about soil a bit, and hopefully you will see some parallels with your life, or your understanding of faith – and then, take a moment or two to join the dots.

It has been a privilege for me to spend some time with these wonderful people. The theme for the retreat the past few days was “Christ, the community and me”. It was an attempt to look at different types of community and where our place may be within. We heard from 3 people sharing their passions, a shepherd, a beekeeper and a soil scientist. Maggie, the beekeeper, told us about the incredible way in which members of the bee colony take on different roles at different times, to serve the colony best. David, the shepherd, told us about a shepherd being amongst his sheep – and loving them- and a wonderful tale of a true and faithful shepherd searching for the lost sheep – dog! Millie, the soil scientist, told us about the amazing number of different organisms in the soil – that all work together for the health of the soil community. Soil is a precious, mysterious resource, we still know so little about it compared to other ecosystems, yet 4% of the earth’s surface is all that we can cultivate and it accounts for 96% of the world’s food. We are a bit blasé about soil in this country, we take our food for granted – that is until a shortage of lorry drivers or CO2 leads to gaps in the supermarket shelves.

I believe that understanding and appreciating the soil can help us in our understanding of faith. Faith is mysterious – soil is mysterious “night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows though he does not know how”. It saddens me that humanity considers more advanced societies to be those that have moved further away from the land – I believe it diminishes us. How many times have we heard in recent years of the mental and physical benefits of re-connecting with nature?

Carefully stewarded soil, with its amazing capacity to capture carbon, is vital for our future. Farmers are using new planting techniques that place the seed into the ground with precision and by disturbing only 15% of the soil. This reduces carbon loss and means that the seed’s roots and shoots can inhabit and benefit from the stability and relationships of the existing soil community. Traditional ploughing moves 100% of the soil, the large clods of earth are then beaten down to a fine seedbed and the soil community has to rebuild itself. Ordinands, through nudges from God and careful tractor driving by Sue and Mandy, you have been placed with care and precision into your communities. Those of you in these communities, be good soil to them, help them find where God is already working.

However, as with our faith, we can take our soil for granted. We literally walk all over it. Good soil, firm foundations support us and everything we build (building on the rock not the sand) but sometimes soil gets messy, we don’t like it sticking to us, it becomes mud or dirt instead of soil. The terms soiled and dirty aren’t often used as complements! It can be messy – so we cover it up- sometimes with beautiful things (this cathedral) often with not such beautiful things, we smother it, suffocate it with concrete and tarmac. Only last week the RHS suggested that we need to “dig for victory” again, pulling up the paving slabs and tarmac in our driveways, releasing and planting the soil. Never smother your faith, let it breathe, breathe through it, release it, let it shine!

Another reason for taking soil for granted is that it has an incredible capacity to forgive. One of the hardest things for me as a farmer is to see my soil damaged, it happens sometimes after a wet winter spell when our outdoor pigs have churned up the ground. And yet, after a period of the right weather, it heals, reforms and is able to sustain life again. Environmentalists were amazed when, after the sustained flooding on the Somerset levels in 2014, when catastrophic and long lasting damage to ecosystems was predicted, within a year the soil had healed and life once again, flourished. Soil is forgiving, our faith is built on forgiveness. “Forgive, as the Lord forgave you”.

Yet, for all the precious, mysterious, supportive and forgiving qualities of soil, (as with our faith),it is also vulnerable. It can be compacted and damaged with too much pressure. Left exposed, bare soil is vulnerable to harsh conditions. Across the world today, increasingly through the extremes of climate change, heavy rains and flooding are washing away too much soil. We protect soil by planting with crops or trees, plants to absorb the impact of the wind and rain, to put down roots and hold the soil together, to stop the goodness from being leached away so that the soil can release it’s full potential at the right time. It takes more that a lifetime, over 100 years to form just 1 cm of soil – it’s precious!

So, families, friends, congregations, training incumbents, senior clergy – nurture and protect this precious soil -these precious people seated here today – so that their amazing potential can be released.

Finally, a challenge for each of you, the soil is dry at the moment, the next time it rains, to rush outside, kneel down and smell the soil. Then thank God for this heavenly incense, the mystery of the soil, and the mystery of His love for each of us. Amen.