

Sunday 15A 12 July 2026

We were once visited by a soil scientist who dug a patch of soil in our garden and compared it to a patch or spadeful of soil from a nearby intensively cultivated field. He's developed a standard spade test to assess the fertility of various soils. Ours, you will be pleased to know was good: friable, highly porous, roots throughout the soil – the result of much manure and compost over the years, a rotation of crops and no heavy machinery or compaction of the soil. We'd double dug in places and avoided walking on the soil when we could. The spade test in the nearby field was quite different. The soil was difficult to break up, consisting of large lumps, non-porous, anaerobic in places, few roots, grey-blue in colour: the result of many years of intensive farming with heavy machinery and needing lots of artificial fertilisers and weed-killers to keep it going.

We can be like that: heavy, dull, needing lots of artificial input to keep us going, or rather to keep us in this unreceptive state where merely surviving is enough and no wider vision, no concern for others is possible. It's a sort of closed loop which ends up feeding on itself and is ultimately self-destructive, impossible to sustain. What Jesus is offering instead is his description of the receptivity of various soils to the same seeds sown on all and the possibility of a greening of the land and it's people through grace: the ready willingness to receive God's love in order to grow. It requires some double-digging on our own part and a resistance to all those artificial aids which fill our time and thoughts and, we foolishly imagine, sustain us: some can be useful, but please not all the time. There is a place for prayer and focusing on others and not simply oneself, the groundwork which prepares us for gifts and graces we never knew we had. The disciples are puzzled by this just as much as the rest of the crowd, caught up as they are in that legalistic framework which seems to demand obedience to the current culture of do's and don'ts rather than the culture of God's free spirit, blowing where it wills, casting seed everywhere for those who have ears to hear – the fall of the seed, the sound of the word in silence. The founder of the spade test describes *“a soil with good porosity and a wide range of interconnected pore sizes (as) like a person who is open-minded, who reaches out to understand where others are coming from, and who fosters life and creativity.”* (Bruce C Ball *The Landscape Below* p36) The author is keenly aware however that this doesn't mean an absence of modern technological methods also. Organic farming will not be enough on its own to provide for the world's food needs but a balance is needed in which the soil is given a chance to be itself, is trusted more, cared for, allowed to respond in it's own way, given responsibility. There are obvious parallels here with ways of being Church, the hierarchical model is not enough on its own – it cannot sustain us. It gives the illusion of all being well with the Church, lots of dressing up and long lines of bishops and priests in regulation uniform or uniform regulation and, like those artificial aids such as television and social media which

we believe are essential to our lives now they can get in the way of our taking responsibility for our true selves and the nurturing needed by love, by God and one another.

I've been away for a week and came back yesterday to a courtyard full of happy people after a day of creative caring for one another. Perhaps I should go away more often.