

Trinity College Cambridge
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Picturing Easter: The Life of the Church
Vincent van Gogh *The Sower*

Genesis 8: 15–end Mark 4: 1–9

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On Christmas Eve in 1888, in a scene too gory for me to describe fully – and perhaps too well known for me to need to – the despairing Van Gogh attacked himself with a razor, slashing at his ear and face. Gauguin, who had come to join him in Arles, in Provence, a little over a month before, had been preparing to leave, unable to bear the intense and paranoid demands being placed upon him and Van Gogh's suspicions and recriminations when he failed to live up to them. Gauguin beat a hasty retreat and, a little less than 18 months later in July of 1890, after periods in hospitals and asylums, Van Gogh was dead, at his own hands, after a very clumsy suicide attempt – though up to the end, working at a furious pace, going like a painting locomotive as he put it, producing a stunning body of work, as you all know.

Just before that Christmas Eve, in November of 1888, Van Gogh painted the picture you have before you.¹ To his brother Theo, he wrote describing the canvas thus: 'Large lemon-yellow disc as sun. Yellow-green sky with pink clouds. The earth violet, the sower and the tree Prussian blue'. Now according to one critic, commenting on the picture, the 'placement of the figure's head against the sun lends the work a certain religious air' – which indeed it does, since placed there, the sower has a bright and prominent halo. But of course, the picture, like so many of Van Gogh's canvases, does not need to be lent 'a religious air', since – with or without the halo – the scene comes from one who looked out at the world thorough an imagination saturated with religious imagery and sensibilities. And the image of the sower – on which he had heard his father, a Dutch reformed minister, preach on very many occasions – held a central place in this imagination. It was, as another commentator puts it, a veritable *idée fixe*² for him, one to which he returned more than 30 times in paintings and drawing, from when he began painting in 1882 soon after he had abandoned his various unsuccessful plans to become a preacher himself, right up until the year of his death only eight years later in 1890. But the sower you have, the version he did just before that dreadful parting with Gauguin, is perhaps the definitive version, the one which most expresses an intention lying behind another painting done at the same time and relevant to this picture too: 'I am trying to get at something utterly heartbroken, and therefore utterly heart-breaking.'³

¹ Vincent van Gogh, *The Sower* (November 1888), Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. See: <http://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/vgm/index.jsp?page=4500&lang=en>

² Naifeh and White-Smith.

³ Letter, 634.

Many of Van Gogh's attempts at painting a sower were done in homage to the great and influential work of Millet of 1850 which you have on the back page of the order of service.⁴ Van Gogh had never seen this picture in the flesh so to speak, but he possessed a print of it – and his first sower, done at the beginning of his short and intense career as a painter, and his last (also there on the back of the sheet),⁵ were very definitely homages to this picture, created from memory. But it was only with the canvas with the large lemon disc as the sun, that he made the subject his own.

When a sower goes out to sow – well, we know how it goes and the parable, which without any further layer of interpretation, recounts an everyday and well known tale: some seed falls by the wayside, on the path, and will be eaten by birds. Some falls on stony ground – and having no earth springs up quickly only to be scorched by the sun. Some falls amongst thorns – and is choked by those thorns, and will never come to harvest. And some – some falls in good soil – and bears a great yield.

That is how it goes. But plainly this simple story admits, if not exactly of two interpretations, certainly of two moods or tonalities so to say – and we have these two moods or tonalities in Millet's picture, and in Van Gogh's, quite different interpretation.

Millet's sower strides boldly to his task. He is a monumental figure – statuesque – filling the frame and the landscape. His front foot is firmly planted as he takes a confident step forwards into the future, casting the seed around him as he goes. Millet was concerned, here and elsewhere, to express something of the nobility and dignity of labour – and his image of the sower as a man of destiny, so to say, is an image of hope and confidence.

Van Gogh's sower in his definitive version with the lemon sun is quite different. His sower is a darker figure than Millet's. His twisted posture is altogether less confident and assertive than the striding, strident pose Millet chose. Van Gogh's sower seems almost diffident in his labour – and far from filling the frame and dominating the landscape, this lonely figure, set against that distant horizon, draws our attention to something of the size of the fields and of the task. If there is hope – and a sower must sow in hope or he wouldn't sow – there is also a loneliness and uncertainty in this picture, a sense of the precarious nature of the labour being undertaken. If Millet's sower is a figure with a sense of destiny, striding out confidently into the future, Van Gogh's sower is at best someone who hopes against hope, so to say. This sowing is a venture – so much so that it seems nigh on miraculous that the seed, scattered to the wind in this large and open field, should ever triumph over the dry, stony ground, the hungry birds, the blistering sun and choking thorns and come to harvest. Both sowers sow in hope; but this sower, Van Gogh's own sower, haloed by the setting sun, labours uncertainly in the encroaching darkness.

⁴ Jean-François Millet, *The Sower* (1850), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. See <http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/the-sower-31601>

⁵ Vincent van Gogh after Millet, *The Sower* (October 1889), Private Collection. See <http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/vincent-van-gogh/sower-after-millet-1889>

But which picture is right – if I can put it like that? Which picture tells it as it is? The sower of the parable, as the parable is explained, sows the word – which like the seed which stands for that word in the parable, has a hard time making its way in a hostile world. Was Millet right to give us a confident, strident, statuesque sower, full of hope? Or was Van Gogh right to depict a sower who can only hope against hope? – was he right, that is to say, to find something ‘utterly heartbroken, and therefore utterly heart-breaking’ in the parable of the sower, sowing the word of God in a world where that word will, oh so precariously and uncertainly, put down roots?

Let me tell you something heartbroken and utterly heart-breaking about the word of God falling on dry stony ground, choked by thorns, burnt by the sun. You will think I am changing the subject, but bear with me.

Twelve years ago, the Home Office’s then Director of Prisons spoke of ‘the immorality of our treatment of some prisoners and the degradation of some establishments’. In early April of this year, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons reported on the case of two disabled prisoners at Winchester jail confined in their cells for 23 and half hours a day, and with no easy access to washing facilities. Twelve years later, and still the same degrading treatment. This surely needs no comment. But there is a graver – and more heartbroken – aspect of the treatment of prisoners even than these degrading conditions – and this is that after prison, many prisoners, to borrow a resonant phrase, ‘continue to wear “invisible stripes”’,⁶ meaning that even when they have completed their sentences, prisoners in this country suffer from an on-going stigmatization which effectively excludes them ‘from employment, educational, and social opportunities’, even from the chance of maintaining family life, ever afterwards.⁷ The results are unsurprising and grim – figures for reoffending are terrible and rates of suicide amongst ex-offenders are astonishingly high.

What this means, of course, is just that our penal system, no matter whatever principles it may espouse, in practice expresses no notion of forgiveness at all. In a system of what we might call measured retributivism, certain punishments would expiate certain crimes, so that criminals would not be criminals for life, but would become ex-criminals on the completion of their sentences. In our system, however, in our practice, even after prison, many prisoners, to use that phrase again, ‘continue to wear “invisible stripes”’ – and their punishment has no measure or end. As a society we remember crimes, as all societies do and should – but we remember them unforgivingly; and this, no Christian society should do.

For the word of God – that which has been scattered to the world like the seed of the parable – comes to us with a particular command. ‘Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them who trespass against us’ – so Christ taught and commanded us to pray. And if the radical nature of this demand is lost on us, we have in addition, Christ’s enactment of its

⁶ Maruna, 12 and 5, with references.

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meaning in the story of the woman taken in adultery, to which that incomparably great preacher and pastor Augustine returns again and again, in pleading for clemency for convicted murderers. Every judge, Augustine would say time and time again, recalling this story, must remember that he too stands in need of mercy. As he liked to say to such judges – we plead not only for sinners, but before sinners, not just on behalf of sinners, but to sinners.

What is utterly heartbroken, and therefore utterly heart-breaking, in the parable of the sower, in the sowing of the word in the world, is the failure of this word to take root and bear fruit. The sadness of the scene is just that this word struggles to make its way, that it is overcome, overwhelmed. So what are we to say to the despairing Van Gogh with his grave and gloomy interpretation of the parable? What should we say about this sower who sows diffidently, uncertainly, unsurely, as that great sun sets? What might this picture say to us?

Augustine, preaching on this parable to his congregation exclaims as follows: ‘change your ways while you can; turn the hard places with the plough; remove the stones from the field, pull up the thorns ... Don’t have a hard, obstinate heart, in which the word of God will die off very quickly. Don’t have thin soil, in which charity won’t strike deep root. Don’t choke the good seed with worldly anxieties and greedy ambitions, the good seed that is scattered among you ... Be good soil.’⁸ And that is the point. The mission of the church – for which Van Gogh had come to have very little time – is not just to have hope in the word of God, as if being optimistic and cheery is enough to make a Christian. The mission of the church is to vindicate the word of God by being the good soil, the place where that word takes root and form and flourishes. The task of the Church is not just to be, and to call the world to be, hopeful, but to give the world cause to be hopeful by being the ground and soil in which hope may grow.

Van Gogh, once had his heart set on being a preacher of the word, but by the end of his life, his relationship with Christianity was highly ambivalent – ‘I can do very well without God both in my life and in my painting’, so he said. The crimes of Christianity – especially the barbarity of conversions in New World – and the hypocrisies of the church, were the stuff of nineteenth century anticlericalism, and it was his despair at the church that led to his despair about the progress of the word of God in the world. But even as he painted his own sower, this less than confident sower, he still returned to Millet’s more confident sower, time and again – it is as if he wanted Millet’s sower to be the right one, but looked out on the world, and thought that it was not so for the word of God falls onto barren ground. And what can we Christians ever say about despair about us, the soil, other than confess our failure, time and again, to be the Christians God would have us be? Too often the church fails to be what God intends, that place where the word of God takes root and, taking root, vindicates hope.

⁸ Sermon 73.

And yet, hoping against hope it may seem, we do find signs of the word of God making its way in the world. There are places where the church does not simply tell prisoners to hope, but in its work and witness, is a cause of hope for prisoners. Let me mention one such instance: the Community Chaplaincy project,⁹ which has its origins in Canada, and operates throughout the UK – is a model of what it might be for us to take seriously our fellowship in humanity and sin with fellow sinners, welcoming and accepting prisoner from the prison gates and supporting them beyond those gates – thereby modeling what it might be for our society to remember their crimes forgivingly and not resolutely unforgivingly. This work shows that the church can indeed take to heart the word of God, and can indeed vindicate the hope of prisoners that they might have something better than a hopeless life carrying invisible stripes. There are other examples of such work: hospices have modelled care for the dying, and L’Arche models what it might be to give hope to the mentally handicapped. There are signs of hope – but there need to be more.

It is on my mind – you can probably tell – that this is the last Sunday of the year. Although Van Gogh came to have an ambivalent relationship with Christianity, his painting is to us a sermon and a good one for this Sunday: it bids us act for the sake of the word of God. May all of you; may all of us – be good soil. Be signs of hope in the world and not just signs but the ground for hope – be the good soil in which the word of God takes root, that your lives, now and in the future, may be a blessing.

⁹ <http://www.communitychaplaincy.org.uk>