Too much, too little and just enough

Every spring we plant a variety of seeds and seedlings in the garden and encourage our kids to nurture their growth all the way through the summer. If all goes well, then a season of mixed salad awaits us all, and while that may not be the children’s favorite meal, like many other parents, I assure them it is good for them.

And of course, it is.

But it’s not just the eating of greens:
- there’s much to learn from
- the discipline of attentive care
- that monitors growth and harvests the fruit.

One lesson from this basic introduction to horticulture is that
- too much water can be as bad as giving plants too little.
- You can drown tomatoes as easily as kill them in soil that is parched and dry.

Between too much or too little they can discover the joy of just enough.

And while none of this cultivation is remotely life threatening for our family, the garden experience reads like a mini parable of the devastating changes that are happening increasingly around the world.

In places like Kenya, cultivating crops amidst extreme and erratic weather patterns is a matter of life and death.

Too much water can sweep away crops in torrential floods
while elsewhere too little means the land is cracked in desperate drought.

Communities such as those featured in this year’s Christian Aid Week depend on reliable and regulated water supplies for their livestock, crops and livelihoods.

You may have already heard of Rose,
- who lives in Kitui county,
- where the chaos of climate change has devastated
- the growth of beans and maize
- and left her land and her family, thirsty, hungry and very poor.

There is sometimes too much or too little, but rarely, it seems, just enough.

For Rose one regular refrain of the Psalms of lament might be her daily prayer: ‘how long O lord, how long, how long before what we have is enough and what we have is just.
How long until there is justice and enough.
Not far away, a contrasting story can be told by Florence.

Thanks to donations from Christian Aid and the work of local partners, she has built a small dam beside her farm, enough to gather the rains when they might otherwise overwhelm, retaining sufficient irrigation for the weeks when there isn’t a cloud in the sky.

With this dependable source of water,

Florence can grow tomatoes, onions and chillies on her farm.

Her family children can eat their own healthy vegetables.
She can keep bees and sell their golden honey.

Florence can join her voice with the set Psalm for today, she can ‘sing a new song unto the Lord, for God has done great things’.

With her, the rivers and mountains

and indeed that dam of plentiful fresh water

can sing before the Lord who judges the world in righteousness.

Surely such a God will declare:
this is justice,
and this is enough,
this farm is just and enough,
a sign of grace,
an echo of God’s kin-dom song,
finding it’s home on the earth.

Florence’s farm is an echo too,
of the astounding events we read of in the book of Acts.

Peter has had an epiphany of God’s equality and inclusivity.
Heaven has revealed in a dream the mind -blowing truth
that Gentiles are as welcome as Jews in the family of God.

And just to underline the point,
as Peter is preaching,
the gift of the Holy Spirit
comes upon the very people he would have discounted but a day before.
These Gentiles are speaking in tongues and praising God.

As the Gentiles receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit
Peter glimpses just how generous and hospitable is the Holy Spirit.
In response to these events, he asks the crowd:

‘Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water?’
In other words, can anyone deny them the opportunity of the sacrament, to make an ‘outward, visible sign of this inward, invisible transforming grace’.

For these Gentiles,
as with people like Rose and Florence,
the tangible presence of water
makes visible the work of the Holy Spirit in their midst.
And it reinforces the importance
of the physical,
the embodied,
the earthly life,
blessed indeed by the Holy Spirit,
The lord and giver of life.

Perhaps the astounding thing from this scripture today,
is not that the Spirit is poured out upon Gentiles,
but that it may be just as holy an act
to drench a thirsty land with water from a dam,
as it is to sprinkle blessing on a baby’s head
or immerse a believer in the waters at their baptism.

And here is a challenge for many of us
who often confine our understanding of the Holy Spirit to the boundaries of church.

For sure, the Holy Spirit is at work with our congregations,
but as theologian Jürgen Moltmann says,

‘we need to experience that the life-giving Spirit in the faith of the heart and in the society of love leads ... beyond the limits of the church to the rediscovery of the same Spirit in nature, in plants, in animals, and in the ecosystems of the earth.’

And if that is so then, echoing Peter,
how ‘can anyone withhold the water’ needed for thirsty animals, crops and people across the world?

There should be enough.
It ought to be just.
And if it is not then Moltmann continues,
‘people who truly affirm and love life
[will] take up the struggle against violence and injustice,
[because] they refuse to get used to it.’
Where life isn’t just, where there isn’t enough,
Christians are called ‘to refuse to get used to it.’

If the water of baptism is symbolic of new life,
then so too is the water behind Florence’s dam.

It too is a sign of the Spirit and the coming of the kin-dom.
For Florence and those who helped her,
defied how things were,
they refused to get used to what wasn’t enough
and what simply wasn’t just.

They discovered the great truth of what the poet Alice Walker says,
that ‘resistance can be the secret of our joy.’

That secret is something that Jesus plainly understood.
Even as he stood on the threshold of great suffering,
Resisting the powers of betrayal and death,
he finishes his farewell message to his friends saying,
‘I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you,
and that your joy may be complete.

My joy in you and your joy complete.

Jesus knew it was for the joy set before him that he despised the shame and endured the cross.

Despite the suffering of Good Friday and the silence of Holy Saturday,
this is a joy that believes that Sunday
and resurrection is coming.

Despite the suffering of climate chaos and the silence of many in power,
this is a joy that believes that the kin-dom is coming,
that trusts in the spirit,
and works with God for change,
a joy that refuses to get used to all that is not enough and all that is not just.

I know the complexities of issues like this can sound like a flood of impossible tasks.
I understand how in these times, we might all be experiencing a drought of encouragement.

But with God there is always enough and more.
As we begin this week for Christian Aid,
the challenges, both personal and communal,
local and global are indeed great.

But so too is the joy set before us
and so too is the abundance of life that is found in the Spirit.

To resist the injustice,
to overcome poverty,
to nurture creation,
to act in these ways,
even with small and faltering steps,
this is surely a sign of our love for God,
our love for God’s people
and indeed for God’s creation.

These things are a sign of our obedience to heaven,
our faithfulness to Christ,
and our fellowship in the Spirit,
These things are the secret of Joy

and scripture assures us that even in struggle
these commands of God
will be far from burdensome,
resistance is not futile
victory will come,
that the world will have enough
and the nations will finally be just.

This Christian Aid Week, we can join in the struggle of communities with Rose
We can celebrate the changes in communities with Florence,

If we make that choice
we refuse to get used to the way the world is
We commit to struggle for all it might be
A world that is just and an earth with enough

If we follow Jesus
If we live in the Spirit
Then the kin-dom will be discovered among us

If we make that choice
our joy will be complete in Christ
And Christ’s joy will be complete in us.