

The View from Grabbist

Ne'er cast a clout

'til May be out

I've often heard this proverb quoted by seasoned gardeners or farmers with a twinkle of warning in a knowing eye. I thought that its meaning was clear to everyone but me, never having quite been certain what was meant! The first time I heard it, the 'clout' was implied as being a lump of earth which might – if there's a late burst of cold weather – be frozen. But when I looked the saying up, I discovered that its meaning is ambiguous. A 'clout' can be anything from said 'clod' of earth to a blow on the head, clotted cream or a fragment of cloth. The last meaning chimes with another commonly held meaning of the proverb – "don't discard winter clothing until the end of May", elsewhere known in the continent. It could also relate to waiting until after the blossoming of the Hawthorn, also known as the May Tree after its stunning 'May blossom' that dots our hillsides, a symbol of rebirth. (Thanks to Gary Martin's "The Phrase Finder" for the research: www.phrases.org.uk). Whatever the origin, one overall sense is clear: don't plant delicate stuff until you know there's no more risk of frost *ne'er cast a clout....!*

My mental meanderings into all this have brought me to another phrase I heard last year: *the times are urgent; we must slow down*. This was said by Bayo Akomolafe, Nigerian/German teacher, public intellectual and author. The paradox is that if we take seriously the crises of our times, we might then feel a great urge to act *now*. But I think we are witnessing that premature action and activism (I am always wary of *isms*) can lead to more, not less, crisis - however well intended. Like sowing seeds prematurely that might grow to seedlings, but which then are killed by a late frost! A deeper way through, I think he is saying, is to learn to do the counter-intuitive thing and *brake*, not accelerate.

It may be that the chaos of our times is in fact an inevitable precursor to something deeper that we must embrace, not resist. Chaos, according to contemplative Fr Thomas Keating, is often, or always, where the new emerges from, not from order. Uncomfortably it may be, but chaos and even crisis is essential. Mothers will witness to the chaos and pain of childbirth. Learning in the face of chaos to *slow*, to *accept*, refusing to be wistfully *regretful*, while remaining *hopeful...* these are all the deeper work that's necessary. This is the preparation of the ground which means we might, eventually, be able to sow something that will grow, and in fact will eventually be strong enough to endure a full-on hard winter. Akomolafe also says this: *'In order to find your way, you must lose it. Generously'*. I think this echoes the words of Jesus: if you want to find your life, you must lose it, but if you lose your life, you will find it!

Kenneth