

Welcome everyone to the George Richardson Lecture.

I'm Rhiannon Grant and I'll be hosting Tonight's session on behalf of the Centre for Research in Quaker Studies and the Quaker Studies Research Association.

The George Richardson Lecture is our joint annual event at which a senior scholar in Quaker Studies is invited to speak, and the lecture is also published in the Journal of Quaker Studies.

Tonight our lecture will last for about 45 min to an hour, and we'll then have time for questions before finishing about 8:30pm. UK time.

If it would be helpful to you. You can access the captions in zoom

The lecture will also be recorded, and we'll circulate a link afterwards which you can share with other people.

So I'm delighted tonight to be welcoming our George Richardson lecturer for this year, Rachel Muers

Rachel is Professor of Divinity at Edinburgh University where in 2022, she became the first woman to be appointed to their historic Chair of Divinity

Her work includes the historical development of Christian theology and creating new responses to today's urgent questions.

Most relevantly for today this includes work directly relating to the Quaker tradition such as her 2015 book *Testimony, Quakerism and Theological Ethics*.

Her topic tonight is the seed and the day of small things, finding power and powerlessness in Quaker theology.

So over to you when you're ready, Rachel.

Thank you, Rhiannon, and thank you all. I'm really honoured to have been asked to give this lecture, and

I'm actually really humbled by the number of friends with the capital F and a small F who's taken the trouble to attend and it was lovely to see all the names coming in on the of the through the zoom waiting room, and it's also lovely to be in some sense at Woodbrooke.

I've chosen, as you've seen, to focus this lecture on the theme of this year's of the forthcoming Quaker Studies Research Association Conference on Power

And I'd also like at the beginning to express thanks to the speakers and Participants at the Society for the study of Theology's annual Conference, which this year this April was a very rich and ecumenical explanation of the theme of power in theology, which has been very much in the back of my mind, as I've been preparing the lecture.

So, as you've seen, the title is the Seed and the day of small things. finding power and powerlessness in Quaker theology.

And I should do. I could do with sharing some slides about this point. So i'm just going to try and do that. This is where we realise that I've, the technology is going a bit wrong, so due to entirely to my fault, not to the actual technology.

I will show you my nice title slide, which you failed to see because I'm quite proud of it. So you're jolly well going to see the title slide. There's the title slide with some mustard seeds.

We'll have a little bit about mustard seeds later, and a bit more about a sower.

What they actually wanted to show you next was roughly what's happening in the lecture.

The overall AIM is to explore a few strands in the theology of power of Quakers of the first 2 generations. So I'm spending some time in the seventeenth century.

And I'm looking at how they engage and express the experience of empowerment to in relation to social and church structures of power. So it's Quaker empowerment and power structures.

I'm going to start with the wider context, bit by saying a bit about how this theme fits into wider questions with which I'm engaged as Rhiannon said, as a theologian who looks within and beyond Quakers.

So a bit of a wider theological context.

Then there's a little bit about how we're reading the Bible here, or how the Quakers, how I think the Quakers I'm talking about are reading the Bible.

And then we're going to look at some of the ways in which the Quakers of this period talk about the seed as a way of thinking about how they relate to power and empowerment.

I've got a deeper dive into one text this one by John Whitehead, that I find especially illustrative of some of these power dynamics, if you like, in Quaker theologies of the seed.

And then of picking up on another related Biblical theme, I find very helpful and intriguing in this respect Quaker readings of this bizarre Biblical text, or the day of small things.

And although it's mostly historical at the end, I want to try, and at least gesture towards what I take to be the characteristic Quaker question, the Quaker question Quakers normally care most about. So what? So what for us now? What can we do with any of this? Now let's see how we get on.

So in my wider work I'm doing some work on the question of voice in theology, particularly about the voice that speaks about God and about all things in relation to God, the theological voice.

And one of the questions to which this brings me as a Quaker doing theology is, how should we reckon with the reality of divinely empowered speech? Speech empowered by God

Thing is that much of what's written on? How people do theology beyond Quakers in my main world about how we speak of God comes down to quite pretty fast to questions about authority and authorisation.

People ask questions like what makes this speech about God, or right, or good or worth following.

Which speakers, sources, methods, norms, institutional frameworks make this speech trustworthy.

I think those are fair enough but they are secondary questions, because the first question is, how come people can speak of God at all.

How come that is speech of God to argue about in the first place and not merely as a hypothetical possibility, though how might people start talking about God talking about their experience of God? But how is it actually an experiential and a historical given.

And I find that questions put on the table with particular clarity in the context of revivals and other outbreaks of religious creativity

Especially outbreaks of religious creativity, which are characterised by new and unusual empowered speech and speakers alongside other innovations in community and practice, new empowered speech and speakers alongside other innovations in community and practice, such as what I often talk about

When I'm teaching the Azusa Street revival at the origin of the Pentecostal movement. That's one of your pictures there, and such as the emergence of Quakivism some 250 years before that.

The question what's going on. What can we say about when and how the new empowered voice emerges is actually a remarkably difficult and risky question to ask, at least in theology.

Because it means you have to take seriously, not just the theoretical possibility, but the experiential affirmation that this we can say that God changes things in real time.

And it's no wonder, especially now in an age of disturbing charismatic and Populist power.

But the follow up questions about authorisation. And how do you know? Jump forward immediately. Almost before we've got started talking about empowerment people start asking, how do you know? How do you know this is really God? How do you distinguish true and false prophecy.

How do you avoid all of the pitfalls as soon as they appear as soon as you step off a known path.

And one of the reasons I've put Azusa Street here, maybe for some contemporary Quakers juxtaposing Quaker origins with Pentecostal origins might provoke just these questions yeah, how do we know? How do you avoid the false prophecy by 250?

But it seems to me that for Quakers as self-confessed heirs of a moment in the mid seventeenth century, not only of religious power struggles, which is how it often gets painted. It gets painted just as a war, but of creative empowerment, of new speech and action.

Quakers can't just jump straight to suspicion. We need to acknowledge and own the real power that is there. If you're getting feeling, this is all a bit airy fairy up in the air. Let's have a look at Margaret Fell's narrative of the incident in Elviston Church which Quakers tend to know pretty well. That's what you've got here on the slide.

She writes. George Fox desired in the church, that he might have liberty to speak, and he that was at the pulpit said that he might.

Among other things, Fox said, You will say, cry, say this, and the apostle say this, but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of light, and hast walked to the light? And what thou speakest? Is it inwardly from God?

Now there is in this moment that fell the rates and established structure a power structure that grants permission and authorisation to speech, and that gives order to speech. So there's a pulpit for somebody occupying it.

And that gives order to speech. So there's a pulpit for somebody occupying it.

And what's more, George Fox asks and gets given permission, right? So the unknown traveling lay, preach, expect, it is permitted to speak, but still some people are ruled out as possible speakers, even in this relatively permissive environment, but Fell herself doesn't at this point get up and start preaching right? That's not, that's not in the picture at the moment.

Does this, this order of an authorisation, an ordering power. But to by the most striking thing about this narrative, and the quite particularly this core question, what Canst thou say, it's not that it was asked. You know not that not that, but something comes along and what cast I say, but that it wasn't immediately taken as an injunction to stop all theological speech or spiritual interpretation, because from one perspective it sounds pretty off putting.

It sounds like an instruction or warning to refrain from saying anything.

The one who is not a child of light, and has walked to the light, and who cannot claim that the source of their words is inwardly from God, had better shut up.

So what's amazing is not that the question gets asked, but that it gets answered. But if we set it in the context of what happens next of Fell's life and theological work, it appears as a liberation of speech, a calling forth and empowering.

And this empowered speech is both really the action of a bow. Yes, this particular human subject, and inwardly from God.

That's the thing I'll be interested in. How does that question get? How is the positive answer to that question at all?

This complex relationship, which is what I'm mainly talking about in this lecture between, or poverty or power to authorise what is sometimes called ordering power.

That's the pulpit of the speech on the one hand, yeah, and empowerment of the other.

It doesn't it doesn't. This is important. It doesn't set those 2 directly in contradiction as bad power, good power, or power, and resistance, or power and powerlessness

Making sense of Quaker of experience, early Quaker experience, perhaps all Quaker of experience requires a kind of power that is not simply a mirror image of ordering power of the powers of the power that be.

It's not time, primarily resistance, and push back and fight back.

And it's not even first and foremost an alternative order.

It's something else. Empowerment, action of speech inwardly from God or in the power of God has a primary and foundational givenness, a reality that doesn't rely on ordering power either positively or negatively right. You don't wait to be told it's okay,

I mean, with within this way you don't wait to be told it's okay. But you also don't say it just because you want to fight back. It's coming from someplace else.

And what maybe that sounds rather obvious, but I've actually felt it helpfully navigated the complex landscape of power.

An early Quaker thought particularly for understanding the relationship between these 3 things.

The very frequent way that Quakers talk about being acting and speaking in the power of God or in the power of the Lord. That's one thing.

The disavowal by Quakers of active resistance to the powers or violent resistance to the powers that be from fairly early on.

And the affirmation by Quakers that the power of God is, or will be, manifest in the overthrowing of the present of just order of things.

So it's this tension between where we're not fighting back. But God will overthrow the covered order of things, and we are somehow in the power of God.

How are all of those things relating?

I should say I've learned a lot of this for battle in Pennington's work.

She's shown that I think really well that there's a tendency to read persecution as something that defines Quaker spiritual experience and developments in Quaker theology

And we should think rather that it starts from the sense of dividing power, but of being acting at speaking of the power of God and that's driving their responses to the powers that be, but not the sort of interaction, persecution, resistance, some of the so forth, is not the defining factor of the of the theology.

And then, as a theologian myself, who spends most of what I'm working on non-Quaker material it's really important to me to be able to question accounts of divine and human power, that a assume power as power over, or as the power to order, and the power to be in charge of stuff, because that kind of a discussion then starts, gets immediately into a discussion about okay, Who's got the power? Who gives it up.

And they find themselves either valorising vulnerability and powerlessness and sacrifice, and saying it. This is it's as good to be vulnerable, powerless, or going out all the other way, for full of muscular Christianity, and I don't think either of those are great politically and I don't think either of those is great theologically, and I don't think I of those is where Quakers are at.

So that's the big picture I'm trying to paint about power. But what on earth about the seed.

So we've got a little bit of introductory material about the seed, and then i'm going to put it all together.

Okay, that's interesting, because it's got my notes in the background. Sorry about that. I've put up here a few of the best known examples of seventeenth century seed texts that made it into Quaker Faith and Practice, the current Quaker Faith and Practice just to illustrate that whether contemporary British Quakers talk about this motif much or not, and it's not something that we have massive discussions on usually they do clearly recognise it as part of their theological heritage.

Isaac Pennington, who's quoted there, the right hand speech bubble is probably the main Quaker theologian with a developed theology of the seed.

But for reasons I'll explain later. I'm not giving him all the attention in this talk.

Now it's worth reflecting before we get started. But just as a natural symbol, a seed says interesting things about power and powerlessness. It's on the one hand, potentiality yeah, and power to become power to grow.

And particularly in agricultural contexts, power to sustain life. It's very visibly that that right there, that's your food for next year. That's what's keeping you alive, that little thing.

So it's potentiality, right? But then, on the other hand, there's powerlessness, vulnerability, right the seed. It occupies almost no space, and it realises its potential only by first disappearing.

And the other thing is to note here is that the relationship between the seed and those who live by it they need. It is not a relationship of control. Right there's something about the seed is used. His sown is worked with, but it's not controlled. and these are things to have at the back of your mind as we think about.

Seed in the early Quaker theology, which I'm treating mainly as a Biblical keyword, and that's what we've got to come on to next. I've got a little bit.

This is the sort of excursus, if you like, about early Quakers in the Bible.

So I've discussed briefly elsewhere in the testimony. But Rhiannon talked about the way the early Quaker theologians read and use Biblical texts and the fact that they're not usually explaining and arguing connections between text and they're not usually proof texting.

So arguing a case from the Bible, says X. Therefore, that they can do that if they have to, but it's not the default setting.

The image that I've used for seventeenth century Quakers reading the Bible is these sorts of the optometric glasses that they used to put on the of the opticians. They I know very well how this works. This is my life.

They stack up a series of lenses, and if everything's going right. You look through all of the lenses at once, and then you suddenly you see clearly what's in front of you.

And I've said that at least some of the seventeenth century Quaker writings, particularly the more sermon like ones.

They look through the whole Bible, Genesis to Revelation, and Genesis and Revelation are both quite key, in order to see all at once what's going on now? Right? It's not we look at this bit, but this explains

that this explains that it's very, it synchronises. It reads all together. It's not a sort of reasoning of connections. It's an intuitive combination.

I then want to say this is what but the next bit that's more relevant to this lecture. But there was some key. The curving Biblical terms, like the big obvious one, is light which is probably the best known Quaker keyword, but also, like seed, the focus of this paper, which kind of hold together the distinctive vision, the collection of Quaker lenses.

Many Quakers, obviously most Quakers in the early generations of the reading the Bible, to quote what Elizabeth Bathurst said of herself quote unquote "without the help of humane concordance" then it's not a systematic because they're doing a global word search or an organized word mapping and putting together all of the references to seed in the Bible. But still these recurring key terms, light, seed, day, truth, used by this biblically literate community to find their way through the Bible, and to find their voice in Scripture dialect, to quote Bathurst again.

And they become, as they as they thought about and used to reuse the Quaker text these dense packages of theology and spiritual experience kind of carrying the DNA of Quaker tradition of Quakerism in a small space, a bit like seeds, you might say

So, what is the power of the seed in the Bible and a Quaker theology?

The place I normally start when I'm speaking about Quakers and the seed. It's perhaps a little unexpected. Given the images of a first slide.

I start with Genesis 3, and the curse that God places on the serpent after the fall, I should say I'm. Quoting all of my texts in the translations in which they came to early Quakers.

So God says to the serpent, I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.

Hmm!

In much of the English commentary tradition of the seventeenth century, following some of the reformers but not all this is an enormously important text

It's not just a sort of side comment or a the this so weird glitch it is. This is read as the first proclamation of the Gospel, the divine promise of salvation in Christ, because this is about the defeat of the serpent by the defeat of the devil by Christ.

And probably drawing directly on that tradition seed appears very clearly in the earliest Quaker text, the first generation as a reference to Christ. You saw it. Maybe that Fox text I flashed up for a minute. There the seed Christ is over all the doth things

But it's in a very similar space, as it were, to the language of light, because it's used to refer to price as the gracious gift of the source of salvation.

So it's not so much about a person. Theoretically. Who is this person?

It's about, how is God being made, present and powerful and active in the world.

And both of the Quaker text and elsewhere. This language of the seeds specifically, this text about the seed is frequently used to tie together the Biblical story from Genesis to Revelation and to focus attention on the victory over evil right? Because that's what this takes about, particularly in the context of this intense struggle between the victory that's already proclaimed, and in some way already been one, and the presence of suffering and evil.

The seed is cosmically significant. It's the triumph of the power of God over all that opposes it.

Now it's probably obvious to us that this is a totally different meaning of seed from the picture I showed you on the last slide.

Well, it's not totally different at least a bit, the kind of seed you sow in the ground, right? You look at this text if you think Well, yeah, but that just means descendants or offspring. And you'll see. That's how it's translated in later Biblical versions. But the point is in seventeenth century Quaker traditions of reading, at least as I see them.

The coincidence of the words the fact that you talk about the seed here. But then, elsewhere in the Bible you talk about the mustard seed at the sower sowing the seed in the ground.

But just the coincidence of the words is enough to set up a whole series of resonances and connections across the Biblical text and across. People's experience allow them to connect the individual and the cosmic, the inner and the outer, the beginning, the middle of the end.

And all the relation to power and power of evil. Let's try to see how I've got a bit of Margaret Fell again.

Here's Margaret Fell talking about the seed in women's speaking justified.

She writes here, that those that speak against the power of the Lord and the Spirit of the Lord, speaking in a woman simply by reason of her sex, or because she is a woman, not regarding the seed and spirit and power that speaks in her. Such speak against Christ and His Church, and are of the seed of the serpent wherein lodgeth Enmity.

So the claim here is that resistance to women speaking, and women's preaching is resistance to the work of God. Right?

Let's think about enmity here, because that goes to the heart of what I'm trying to say about power.

What's interesting to me in this text is that the enmity, the power struggle, if you like. is specifically a property of the seed of the serpent.

That's the we didn't start the fight right, because this enmity arises as a speaking against the first, the prior experience and manifestation of the seed and spirit and power.

So as Fell sees it as she thinks about it. Should you reflect on her experience. Women are first divinely empowered as speakers. and only then. and spoken against. The language of the seed, and specifically the way early Quakers use it to tie the whole Bible together and look at their experience in the Bible points to women's empowerment as teachers and teachers as this very specific local historical experience as part of this cosmic picture of until that for good over evil.

And it's not about primarily focused here on Women's weakness or powerlessness. There's a reference right at the end to God's mercy and loving kindness to the weak but Fell doesn't begin by saying, women are oppressed, or something like that. She begins with women's we, she begins with where her experience begins with a manifestation of power

But that also points us to the fact that the seed language isn't just about cosmic triumph, Fell is talking about what speaks in women speaking, the real time change in individual lives and the distinctive and remarkable value of this keyboard seed for Quaker theologians is that it lets them speak about how the power of God for salvation. Christ is present in them.

And they're obviously able to do so by the way, that the seed languages operate in the New Testament and the resonances they can set up with the Genesis debt.

So they're also looking at texts like these.

They're looking at 1 P. to 23, and something. It's a real, really key passage for these early friends, but generally doesn't occur to people when they start talking about the seed in the Bible, which at this cause. This links to this like seed to transformation and rebirth that's reflected in lives of love and truth.

And they've also link it, maybe more in a more familiar way to the parable of the sower, where the seed is the powerful and active word of God received in bearing fruit in individual lives.

And especially this, the parable of the sower stuff is pointed to the idea that the seed is a universal free offer, not only of salvation but of empowerment, sanctification of the empowerment for ministry.

So the repeated claim is that the seed of the kingdom is given to all without exception, not just as a manifestation of the love of God.

But as the starting point for acting in the power of God. so where does this leave us in relation to power.

Well, first, this language of the seed, by tying up the individual and the cosmic, the soul of the world makes the relationship of the person.

Like, say the Quaker woman preacher to ordering power to worldly authority, if you like something of secondary importance at most.

Women don't have the power to speak, because the resisting and fighting back, nor because they're specially authoritative. They have it just in so far as the seed of the Kingdom of God given to all, grows and bears food in them.

Empowerment is first.

But then the other thing is that enmity is real. There is for these early friends a seed of the serpent. There are other kinds of power around.

Not real rivals, and, in the important sense, not real power at all, because our opposite to the power of God. What can you have but often very hard to see past.

And that's kind of the conundrum, but can probably at this point the Quaker version of the problem of evil, if you like. If the power of God is at work, what else can the possibly be?

But, conversely, if the power of God is really at work. How on earth are things in such a mess now

Quaker theologians have some obvious-ish ways of answering this in relation to the individual by going to things like Matthew 13.

This text you have in front of you, and saying that the seed that's given to all doesn't necessarily grow or bear food in all

But that on their own doesn't quite name the apparent power of enmity out there in the world the mess things are in.

And it also doesn't tell you what, if anything, this Quaker experience of divide empowerment has to do with their relationship to present authorities to the powers that be.

So to anticipate what I'm going to say on this I'll move on to the next slide, so you can see it.

I'm going to say that Quakers talking about the seed, and especially talking about enmity and conflict around the seed, are trying to name a situation in which ordering power, authoritative power, the powers that be has separated itself from the power of God, and tried to set itself up as something freestanding.

And the result of that separation is a fake or temporary power, with nothing to it that's liable at any moment to collapse into chaos and faced with a power like that set itself up over against

You don't fight it with its own weapons, because that gives it too much credit. You announce it's powerless.

It's separation from the power of God, and you wait it out.

So this is what I think I see going on in our friend John Whitehead.

I'm looking at this. This is a 60 55 text, the entity between the 2 seeds, and you'll see I've given you the front page there, but from this: put the entire argument of your pamphlet in the title.

I mean maybe that's coming back in the age of the search engine. I don't know. But anyway, this is the time you've got part of the little part of the title on your screen.

What it is it's an account of Whitehead's own spiritual experiences and conversion is converted by William Dewsbury.

A defense of himself and his companion in imprisonment, and along the way a lot about where he stands in relation to the powers that be.

William Penn wrote a lovely introduction to Whitehead's works, and said that he, as in Whitehead, was one of those who had seen taste, tasted, felt, and handled the same powerful word of God which they declared of unto others.

And I find him interesting. not just because he writes about this enmity between the 2 seeds, but also because of how he negotiates his relationship to power.

I just want to say one thing about the title.

So the second line there, you see that he claims to have discovered the subtlety and envy of the servant's seed, who persecutes him that's born after the spirit. The key point here, I think, is discovering, unveiling, showing what's going on.

Speaking truth, if you like. It takes a kind of power to do that, discovering and unveiling. but a different kind of power from the one that it takes to persecute.

They said. It starts blasting back in the same kind, but it is executed, exercising a certain kind of divine empowerment.

Here's a key passage. You want to look at that introduces Whiteheads account of his arrest and trial.

And whereas it says, and whereas I'm accused of railing against and condemning authority, I do declare, in the presence of God

It is false for my soul is subject to the higher power, for conscience's sake and magistracy, I own, which is the ordinance of God or David for the punishment of evil doers, and for the praise of them that do well. But he that is in the place of a magistrate, and turns from the light of Christ, and casts the law of God behind his back. Him do I witness against. yet no power do I resist.

But in that dwell, I think that has to be dwell, which suffers all things, hope of all things, and i'm subject to the will of God, in whom I have that piece which the world cannot give nor take from me.

Now, when we start off these initial efforts to the higher power. That's the company by references to moments 13. It's a fairly straightforward affirmation of willingness to be subject to a just ruler.

An ordering power that orders rightly if you like, an ordering power that is united with an exercise in line with divine empowerment. But the holder of ordering power that turns from the light of Christ has no legitimacy, and there's an interesting little. There's a little in the text itself there's a little scriptural, a marginal note which points to Isaiah 59 which is all about God's vengeance on unjust judges. So it just sort of puts that in the margin and moves carries straight on.

So far, so revolutionary in a way. But then the text immediately turns this bit of put in red, yet no power do I resist.

So the emphasis in the main text is not on the overthrowing of unjust ordering power, nor even on the expectation of God's vindication, though that's certainly present but on dwelling in that which suffers all things hope of all things, and on peace in God.

It's not just a text about giving up. It's not about powerlessness, and it's not really a text about power to resist. But it's clearly about some kind of power.

And looking back to the title of Whitehead's text we find that at the heart of it the heart of where he finds this, this non-resistant but empowered action is spiritual birth.

This is how he puts it spiritual birth by the operation of the power of God, through much travail of the immortal seed.

To make good on my earlier claims that the prime of a reality here is divine empowerment I have to look elsewhere in Whitehead's text. I'm afraid I don't have this on slides for you so, because it's too much all over the place. So we're just hopefully follow it through.

He has an argument with and about ministers, as in paid ministers, which is parallel in many ways to this argument he's making here about magistrates.

So political power, ecclesial power, and elsewhere also a military power puts them all.

Argues in the same sort of way about all of them. He says, ministers of Christ, properly so called, so people who rightly exercise the power to order things, walk, he says, in the power of godliness, and bring people to the knowledge of God.

But then he contrasts them. People who walk in the power of godliness with people who, this the key quote, have a form of godliness, but deny the power which leads out of sin.

And then he says, Those people keep people ever learning and never able to come to knowledge of the truth.

So the key defining characteristic of the true ministers as he sees it is that they are being acting and speaking in the power of God; that also empowers others.

They have the power of Godliness. So they bring people to the knowledge of God, the power of God, that also in powers of us

By contrast, the ministers have a form of God in this, but deny the power, and specifically they deny the power that can empower others

Got it.

So the argument is that both the ministries and the ministers that he criticizes, and the magistrates that he's criticizing in this text you've got in front of you and elsewhere.

In this text actually also the way for how he talks about the army, the representatives of the army.

They've taken ordering power. They've taken the power to take charge, take a control without connecting it to the present and active empowering power of God.

And at least in the case of the ministers for Whitehead, They've even given up on the very possibility of power. That's not reducible to power over of power that's not social, of the institutional control. They think all that is, is the ability to control people, to teach them without letting them come to knowledge without the power of God, working freely and without measure. This seeds spread abroad Whitehead's terms. All we could ever have is an endless power struggle between rival forms of order.

And that as Quakers in the Civil War knew only too well, endless power struggle between rival forms of order. Rival governments amounts in practice to comprehensive disorder.

But then, coming back to the beginning of the talk it.

if we do not have the reality of the power of God for salvation, experience, and history, the reality of the transformative power of God experienced in history

Then. Yes, you do give up, then all you have got is a power struggle, you know, and you just have to hope that your side wins.

But that is not. So. Whitehead is staking everything that that not being the limit, that not being all the best.

that can be difficult to handle him. But in text like this, which a text coming out of persecution and coming out of suffering.

Is that having a different kind of power, which is what I'm claiming Whitehead does he claim he has a different kind of power, can often look very like powerlessness.

Just like non-violence can look like passivity or compliance.

And the looking like can actually go very deep and be worth taking seriously, because, you know, the Quaker theologians do persistently talk about the cross, the cross of Christ, the crucifixion as the power of God.

And they do that. That's focusing attention on the contrast between divine power and the powers that be it on the implications of this contrast for quake of experience. But it's giving this sense that the really our context in which the will, the power, and disengaged from the powers of God, appears to completely have the upper hand right.

Which brings me at last to the day of small things, which is just stuff that really intrigued me as I looked at Quaker reflections on the seed. So I put the thought I put a bit of it in, and I hope it's worth your time.

Now this is the day of small things. It's part of a notoriously baffling and difficult to translate section of the book of Zechariah.

And you've got it here at the top in the King James version.

And then the New Revised Standard Version below it, so that you can see the translation is actually really difficult at the end, NRSV completely reverses the meaning.

But what we've interested is the top one, because that's what the Quakers we're reading right.

Now, this line about the day of small things. It's quite nice. It's quite cute, and if you look for theological interpretations of it, you will find as I've learned, because I did, this assorted, uplifting reflections on the value of little noticed faithfulness and service by people who are relatively powerlessness.

The best example and I won't ever be rude about Christina Rossetti. I do actually quite like this poem, is the poem who is despite, who has despised the day of small things which I put here for reference. But it is about the value, the unnoticed value of the humble and the powerless right

The thing is that Quaker theologians, and as far as I've been able to find out so far kind of only they seventeenth century Quaker theologians picked up on this, and did something completely different with it. They made it not mainly a word of encouragement to the despised little people but made it an urgent call to everyone, perhaps especially those who had worldly power.

It doesn't demand to be used that way, or you, indeed, to be used at all, but combined with the Quaker theology of the seed

The day of small things becomes a way to speak about the ways in which the power of God is both experienced and ignored.

It's not a text about oh I'm powerless, and that's okay. For them in their hands. It's a text about how people miss, fail to see, ignore, reject the power that is really available.

Here's a couple of examples of what I mean. These are, Elizabeth Bathurst and Anne Docwra.

Coincidentally, they're both written in the same year, though.

That just happened, and of course there a bit later. So we're second generation. I think that doesn't make a huge difference. But somebody could tell me otherwise.

So I found this first in Elizabeth Bathurst. She has this very long discussion.

Recapitulation of all of the seed imagery for Christ in the Bible, and she finishes it with a parable of the sower which you've already seen the word of god, sown in the heart and then she goes like this.

The seed or grace of God is small in its first appearance, even like the morning light; but as it's given heed to obeyed, it will increase. But if people would despise the day of small things, and will not believe in this low appearance of the light of Jesus in their heart. so and so on, so forth. because it's, the truths are soft and mild, and its voice small and still they out clamour the sound thereof in their consciences, then where will be unto them

Now this is the famous or infamous theology of the day of visitation which we can talk about if you want later or not. If you don't the idea that there is an offer to everyone of this relation to God, but not everybody, takes it up right. But the day of visitation. This put the point of decision.

The point of needing to recognize and respond to the call of God is fled as the day of small things.

And it's interesting to me that it's both about the character of the God who calls the character of the call it's soft and mild, and has a still small voice.

Right? So it's not something that forces you, beats you over the head, and forces you to comply right. It's a call at an offer.

So is it that this is what God is like, but that's also the felt experience of conviction right. There's a risk that the sound of the call will be out clamoured.

So just at this crucial point the seed, the presence of God in the world has a power.

It's something that's going to increase like the morning light. It has immense power, but it can be mistaken. Just at this crucial point for weakness.

So what you pay attention? I did the similar vein Anne Docwra writes this stuff.

Where the seed is sown either another woman that's sown upon the good ground it will bring forth its increase. Okay, this is the power. This is the potential.

And it's called the least of all seeds, and is the day of small things which many have despised for that which they have accounted to be greater enjoyments which are but as the glory of the world which the devil, the God of the world, has shown them.

So the idea is that the day of small things at the hand of early Quaker writers becomes a

It is a day of judgment, right, but it's a double judgment. But it is first. It's the judgment that people exercise right, the choice to despise or not to despise, the day of small things, to ignore or not to ignore this offer of relation to God, which is also an offer of a different kind of empowerment, right.

And their judgment that they exercise there in turn becomes a kind of judgment on them. That's the logic of these texts.

But it's also. It's not just about just because it's also the day of small things is also the day of a turning point, the day when the empowering power of the seed begins its work. and it's only really a day of just small things.

If you resume that power has to think and look big right from the beginning. So one more Quaker theologian to say a little bit about, and that I've got a little bit of. So what to say something about?

I mentioned earlier that Isaac Pennington's probably the great Quaker theologian of the seed, and he also works quite a lot about the day of small things.

But I've been reluctant to give him a starring role in this lecture because it's actually much more likely that many of his contemporaries to advocate a position of powerlessness to say being powerless is good and to say, not just find a different kind of power, but to say, make yourself weak. So this is the sort of thing that he does 6062 text. He says, there's all this I mean. Some of this is he really could turn a face, I think so right? There's all the strength, all the power of the enemy against the work of God in the heart. There's but a little thing like a grain of mustard seed to overcome all this. And yet in this is the power

It's exactly the kind of contrast I've been talking about like this appearance as the powers that we does what looks like. It's in charge.

And then against it. There's but a little thing, but it's in the little thing that is the power right?

But then it comes to the day of small things that he says, whoever have been hired are still waiting and inspecting at the heights of their own wisdom. Let them take heed of despising the day of small things, and know that their proper beginning lies in the lowness, in the humility, even in that nothingness which boughs before the least light of the day.

So Pennington is demanding something a little more he's, demanding not just attention and care, and watchful waiting in the presence of a power that might look a bit like weakness, or be easy to miss.

But lowness and humility as necessary or essential.

And here we have to say, later generations of Quakers found the spiritual practice of the pathway to embrace.

That's part of our tradition, too. It's part of our traditional cherish and value.

And I'm left at the end of it, wondering how to keep this balance between. On the one hand this vigorous refusal the Pennington makes, possibly from his own position, at least starting point of any relative privilege, right.

His rigorous refusal to claim anything that looks like worldly power, the power to order the power to authorize his determination that he has to give all that up.

That seems to be important. And then, on the other hand, this hopeful conviction that we've seen coming through, particularly at his contemporaries.

That divine power can be found is available to all, and is able to transform and reorder the world.

That's sort of the tension. I'm working with the question I'm working with, and I'm coming to the so what? Which is really just questions.

Because when I first drafted this lecture I have to tell you, friends, I was entirely oblivious to the fact that I would be giving it the week after the coronation which is, as I observed it, a very different attempt to perform a more or less exactly inverted relationship between the divine empowerment and world ordering power. So that's an attempt to say what we've got the crown, now let's give it the divine power to it.

And yeah, and of course the coronation is also a performance that took something like its current form pretty soon after the text I've been discussing were written.

So this is the moment in England, at least, when these questions about the relationship between the power to rule and the power of God. Get worked out, and we see a couple of different ways of doing it.

But that in a way that takes me to one of my questions, because, as I read the seventeenth century text, I do wonder whether sometimes what do, whether this Quaker vision of divine, empowerment confronting the disordered world ordering power.

This kind of nobody in charge knows what they're doing, whether that's simply a product of its time, a product of a period when there was instability and violence coming from the top down.

I think to myself Quakerism arose when it was pretty easy to see that competing assertions of the power to order society amounted to a destructive zero sum, game.

And of course. There's a follow-up self-critical question for Quakers about whether Quakerism was in the course of its history, very quickly sucked into its own set of forms of godliness, and denying the power

And so the critical question is, I wonder, is this, after all, despite all by protestations, does it all end up folding back either into a theology for perpetual rebels or quietists, or slippers for the sidelines that isn't up to the task of actually any making anything happen. Option one.

Or a theology to cover up just another attempt to seize control and be the boss. Well that takes me back to the question I ask about Whitehead if he's wrong, and if there is no really empowering activity of God, of God in the lives of individuals and communities, then yeah, that kind of is all we've got. All we've got is the power struggle.

And I can only say that for now the question of is there anything more than the zero sum game of the power struggle is urgent in new ways now it's urgent in the context of polarization, of the so called culture wars of the battles of disinformation in which religion gets turned into a weapon.

And truth is to use Elizabeth Bathurst's words out clamoured.

We need as Quakers we need alternatives to joining the war or sitting on the sidelines. That's what we've always been looking for. We need it in the culture wars as much as we need it in a war with guns right.

And for that it feels to me we need some sense that it's still worth asking and answering, what canst thou say even when a great deal is being said already.

And of knowing that that question, what canst thou say is not simply an invitation to shout louder.

But it's not a theologian's place, I think, to see what that looks like.

I see it in practice in various forms of Quaker activism, including some of those exemplified in the speak truth to power, document, and its follow up.

And perhaps it seems to me the best any Quaker theologian could do is to follow after this practice, and to try to give it voice, and that's what I would hope to do.

And that's what I've got friends, and I would love to hear responses and questions of whatever you have. Thank you.

Thank you very much, Rachel. We'll give you what round of applause. We can on zoom. Thank you very much. and I'll pause the recording.