In the Greek geographer Strabo’s description of the rebuilt city of Smyrna, written around the time of Christ, he lauds the plans and efforts of its designers and its citizens, noting however one glaring flaw (Strabo, Geography 14.1.37):

But there is one error, not a small one, in the work of the engineers, that when they paved the streets they did not give them underground drainage; instead, excrement covers the surface, and particularly during rains, when the cast-off filth is discharged upon the streets. [my emphasis]

I hope that I am not unduly influenced in what I’m about to preach to you by the current scatological fascination of my three-year-old son, one of whose main sources of hilarity at present is to insert the word ‘poo’ into nursery rhymes. ‘Mary had a little poo’; ‘Humpty Dumpty sat on a poo’; the amusement never seems to pall.

In what follows, I hope more to take my cue from St Paul the Apostle himself, who in his Letter to the Philippians (3:8) unabashedly uses the same word as Strabo does. It is skubala in Greek. One distinguished New Testament scholar at Dallas Theological Seminary, in an article on how to translate it, confesses that the tendency of modern versions of the Bible to translate the word as ‘rubbish’ is to betray Pauls’ intent. The word, as he puts it (while with his own rather elaborate delicacy substituting the middle two letters with asterisks) is best
translated shit. Or, to quote him directly, it ‘seems to stand somewhere between “crap” and “s**t”’. (Now there’s a fine distinction; perhaps we can discuss it further in the Q&A after this service!) But he goes on to remark that ‘due to English sensibilities, and considering [a Christian readership] a softer term such as “dung” is most appropriate’.

I hesitate to imagine what the Reverend Mr John Hulse would have made of the introduction of this topic into the sermon he so generously endowed to promote the ‘Excellence of Revealed Religion’, or whether he had the sort of ‘English sensibility’ to which our Dallas professor refers, but if you have such a sensibility, or are part of that imagined ‘Christian readership’ in need of a ‘softer term’, then feel free to leave now or at any stage in what follows. I cannot easily insert the asterisks when speaking aloud. You have been warned…

In Philippians, Paul uses the word of his old life, to heighten the sense of the excellence of what he has now embraced. ‘Yea, but doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered all things, and do count them but [skubala], that I may win Christ’. The vehemence of his opposition to anything that might compromise this new allegiance is communicated in the word’s shock-value.

But then, remarkably, in the passage we heard read this morning we hear Paul’s own recognition that the new status of Christian apostle that he has embraced is that of refuse as well. It's not quite the same word, but it is close. *Perikatharma*: scummy residue. Our hymn picked the theme up just now: ‘things of no worth’ are what the ‘Disposer Supreme’ has commissioned. ‘We are made as the filth of the world, and are the offscouring of all things unto this day.’

By extension, the churches Paul is founding are likely to share this apostolic capacity to disgust. Like the shit discharged in Smyrna, they are liable to make an unwelcome appearance on the streets. This is best explained by the fact that they cannot readily be accommodated on the terms of the existing world order; a world that has no desire to receive their message, and no capacity to absorb it. The philosopher Simon Critchley in his book *The Faith of the Faithless* sees the political implications of this:

Paul’s politics is a building-up of an unwanted offscouring […]: an unclean husk, peel, or skin scale, that which is sloughed off and thrown away, the human dregs and nail clippings of the world – the shit of the earth. […] What is at stake is a politics of the remnant, where the off-cuttings of humanity are the basis for a new political articulation.
But the revoltingness of the apostolic ministry, ‘discharged upon the streets’ of the first century Hellenistic world, is actually a sign that *that world* is in a shit state. This is not finally a judgement on Paul or his followers; it is a judgement on the streets themselves, and on the architects of cities which cannot channel their own waste – in Paul’s terms, on an old order that is passing away.

*Cellere* means to ‘rise’ (as the sewage in Smyrna did). Excellence is that which ‘rises above’. Part of Christianity’s challenge is to allow its offensive gospel to make its way onto the streets, and Paul’s life is dedicated to the task of spreading the gospel around.

Simon Critchley notes the superficial oddity of the double attribution of crapness – to the apostle himself, and to the world around (in its embodiment of what is passing away). ‘How does one live in a world that is trash’, asks Critchley, ‘when one has declared oneself the trash of the world?’ And he answers:

> One lives in it ‘as if it were not’, ἥσος με. [As a] waiting community, an anguished community, an abased community, an ecclesia of the wretched of the earth, living in the world ‘as if it were not’ by attending to a call or demand that is not of this world.

The change is a radical change of perspective, by which what once looked whole and self-contained and in good order (like the city of Smyrna to its citizens, until the rain came) is suddenly exposed in its inadequacies. Its self-perception becomes marginalized by a perspective from elsewhere; ‘a call or demand that is not of this world’. In Critchley’s words: ‘The waiting community becomes the unwanted offscouring that is seen as garbage by the lights of Greek wisdom and sees, in turn, the existing communal world as garbage.’

I want to go back to the word *skubala* at this point, however, because alongside its main meaning, alleged to be so upsetting to English sensibilities, it does lend itself to other uses. Occasionally in around the same period *skubala* was used to suggest ‘table scraps’, or ‘gleanings’. It’s rarer usage, but a legitimate one nonetheless. For example, in a papyrus of 39-40 CE, the writer speaks of animals grazing ‘on the gleanings [my emphasis] of my vegetable-seed crop’ (*Rylands Papyri* 2.149).

So let’s take a moment to consider the possibility of a theological linkage between offscourings and gleanings. Might making this link help us to understand something about the workings of God, who uses ‘things that are not’ in order to
bring to nothing ‘things that are’. What if, what looks like shit to us (because in fact the world, in its own dung-smeared state, distorts our vision) is actually the manifestation of grace, as the gleanings of a crop might represent survival, new life, and new hope for a people with nothing? And in this manifestation showing up the deficiencies of a world that makes no space for those with nothing.

Gleanings are the consequence of the divinely-enjoined letting go of a remnant of the crop (whether grain, olive or grape) so that the poorest in the community may take and use them for their own needs and purposes. The injunction to leave gleanings is enshrined in the law given to the Israelites at Sinai. Here’s how God’s instruction is recorded in the Book of Leviticus. ‘When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, nor shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God.’

Reap, gather, leave. The law’s three verbs indicate a three-fold process, in which the third stage is a form of non-agency: a ceasing, so that room is left for others to act, to make, and to live. There are of course other harvest-related actions one could add to the list here: ploughing (or tilling) and sowing precede reaping and gathering; and after the gathering is over there is also the action of tithing a part of the crop, which might have some affinities with the ‘giving up’ that is involved in leaving gleanings. But it is still the case that the surrender of the farmer’s agency is most radical in simply leaving. The farmer does all the other things – even tithing is the famer’s action. But leaving is really a not-doing.

It is this law of gleanings, given by a God who sees the point of leftovers, that is the salvation of Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi in the Book of Ruth. In the biblical narrative, they stand as the paradigmatic examples of the widow and alien who stand most to benefit from systems with some give in them. To some they might look like skubala, feeding off skubala. To the biblical narrators they are the bearers of the future.

An attitude that seeks to eradicate gleanings can be seen as characteristic of a hyper-mechanized way of living where less and less is left to chance – a world without margins of error. If you are really poor in such a super-regulated world, then you may pin your only hopes of a better future on the wildest gambles – a lottery ticket or a roll of the dice. But the wild gamble is not so necessary in a world that has some give in it. The tumbling golden grains that roll to the edge of the field in Ruth’s world offer some alternative to the desperately thrown dice or the spinning roulette ball in ours.
A gleaning-averse world is like a world without proper sewers. This can make it a very inhumane place in which to live. The Bursar of a College of which I was once a member used to talk about ‘pockets of air in the system that need to be squeezed out’. But there can be so little give in such a world that you hardly dare to be ill, or to ask to leave work early sometimes to see your child’s football match or accompany a friend to a hospital appointment. The imperfection of life – life’s shit – has no outlet, because the reigning ideology denies that it’s really there, or that it’s really as big a problem as it really is. And, once again, this is why its rising up, offensively, is actually a judgement on the reigning ideology: the system that cannot accommodate it. And this is why, paradoxically, the crap may actually be a sign of grace, just as God’s judgement is always a pointer to a different and better way that things might be, and just as Paul’s offensive witness in his context (which made him look like an offscouring) has been something to chew on and draw sustenance and hope from ever since (which makes him like a gleaning).

As a world with no give, a world which seeks to eliminate margins of error, a gleaning-averse world doesn’t just try to suppress what it doesn’t want to see, it is also unable to accommodate what it doesn’t foresee. If everything is budgeted for in advance and accounted for in retrospect there is a hatred of surprise, and therefore a profound hostility to unexpected opportunities and novel or challenging perspectives.

Gleanings represent a form of excess, perhaps also a form of excellence, inasmuch as they rise up and roll beyond the field or the vineyard towards its outer edges, proclaiming a surplus to the main yield of the harvest. They also represent a form of resistance to the purportedly rational calculus that thinks that a good harvest is one in which there are no leftovers. They assert a limit to the ‘rights’ of the landowner over the crop, and a limit to the claims of a certain sort of ‘reason’ that can offer no defence of what (unpredictably and in distributed fashion) eludes the plans of the grower. In this sense, in modern technocratic terms, the gleanings left in the field appear like a distinctive sort of ‘unreason’. In Christian theological terms, however, they stand instead for a different sort of reason. The ways in which the gleaned fruits add surprisingly, innovatively, and particularly to the harvest deliver something back to the activities of sowing and reaping which out-run the control of sower and reaper but nevertheless can in some way complete the purpose of their work. But only by means of the refusal of another form of ‘completion’.

I want to suggest, then, that the value of the idea of gleaning is that it signals a divine logic of generosity – displaying the excellence of a revealed religion whose keynote is grace – and I want to offer three applications of the logic of gleanings.
that I think offer windows onto that divine generosity:

1. Christianity’s embrace of Gentiles, not least through the ministry of Paul, can be seen as permitting Gentiles to glean where Jews sowed, in non-identical imitation of a covenant election. They too will make bread, wine and oil, even if not in exactly the same way as the ‘farmer’ from whose crop they benefit. The New Testament’s apparent distinctions between law and grace can be interpreted by analogy with the distinction between crop and gleanings. Gleanings do not replace the crop; they depend upon it. Christianity is not a fulfillment of the law in the sense of an eradication or subsumption of it; nor is it a total separation from it. It is a sort of additive or supplementary interpretation of the law.

But ‘supplement’ doesn’t quite catch it either. If you read the Levitical laws with a certain adventurousness of the imagination, you might say that gleanings reveal the true point of the main crop. They show that the law (or the crop) is in itself already excessive. Christ/grace/the Law of the Spirit don’t just supplement the Levitical laws, just as gleanings don’t just supplement the crop. They respond to a dynamic already encoded there.

The interpretative flow of this account is from the gleaning to the crop, even if the gleaning is in some crucial way dependent on the crop. What the gleaning is saying is that the crop, too, is a gift; the gratuity of the gleaning becomes a reminder of the fact that our ability to grow the crop at all is itself a gift of grace. The whole creation is a gleaning: God’s letting be, from the abundance of his love. [The creation itself is the non-utilitarian ‘excess’ of the divine fullness: what Father Zosima in Dostoevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov calls the fruit of ‘seeds from other worlds’. We will live in our world, as Christians, in a very different way if we see it as altogether ‘surplus’, and therefore altogether ‘gratuitous’, and therefore altogether ‘gracious’

Incidentally, to regard even the crop as a gleaning is to oppose head-on our modern tendencies to want to make even gleanings a crop. It reaffirms that everything we have, we first received.

Now for two shorter examples of the logic of gleanings.

2. The ‘breath’ of Jesus – the exhalation of his body – is waste, from one point of view, and yet is life from another. It is by his breath, according to John’s Gospel, that the disciples receive the Holy Spirit.
It is a ‘gleaning’ – a ‘leftover’ of his body, for us to work with creatively. We live in the ‘breath’ of Jesus, even after his work is ‘finished’.

3. Let us return to 1 Corinthians 4:13: ‘we are made as the filth of the world, and are the offscouring of all things unto this day’. Offscourings can bear amazing fruit if Paul’s case has anything to tell us. He is a man overcome by God’s generosity to him in leaving a space for his anomalous apostleship. He has been given room to glean; he is a gleaner.

In turn, generosity (the Jerusalem collection, and his own self-sacrifice in being willing to be ‘scum’ for Christ) governs his sense of what his ministry is all about. He wants to leave gleanings for others; more than that, he becomes a gleaning. This is the pattern of Christ’s life too, imitated in the lives of countless saints who have followed the way of discipleship. First, they begin as gleaners – living from a grace beyond themselves; then, in their ill-fittedness to the present world and its norms they take on the appearance of offscourings; and finally their provocative witness becomes grace for others, as what looked for a time like shit turns out to be a new source of gleaning. Paul, like Ruth, looked like a piece of crap only from the perspective of the old world passing away.

Paul offers us an example. At one level we may be asked to be good gleaners, but at the same time we are asked ourselves to be gleanings.

So here is a final thought. Maybe we could imagine ourselves all being the edges of one another’s fields, and therefore being places of gleaning in relation to one another. In other words, we might work at being ready to receive what ‘rolls out to the edges’ from the other ‘fields’ around us, and make something with it that only we can make, so as to complete one another in surprising ways. But we might also work at being things – or ‘someones’ – that those around us can make things with in surprising ways. We might work at being available, even if only through a potentially offensive witness that refuses conformity to the world-as-it-is in order to proclaim hope in a world other-than-this-one.

Paul wrote to the self-contained, self-congratulatory Corinthians, ‘What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?’ Imperfection, impotence, is always also a condition for generosity. When everything is in order – or when a certain order wants to be everything – then there is no give and no take. Generosity is necessary when you have differences, disparities, unevenly-distributed weaknesses and strengths, lacks
and excesses. Generosity becomes the condition of successful interdependence. And modelling good kinds of interdependence, in the face of the monolithic consolidations of our age, is a better way to witness to the Christian God, at whose heart is generosity.

I end by adapting a prayer of John Hulse:

O Lord my God, may thy glorious name be praised, and thy most holy will performed, and all thy laws obeyed, by every creature both in heaven and earth, (and by myself especially,) to everlasting ages! Amen.