

Gardening
Genesis 2.4b-9

Sometimes there are things you just can't get out of your mind. When I read today's Old Testament reading about the Garden of Eden, what came to my mind was not some weighty theological pronouncement, but words from that wonderful group of some years ago 'Instant Sunshine.' I have a feeling I have shared the lyrics of their song with you before, but I think it is worth us hearing them again.

Who mowed the lawns of Eden? Who kept the garden trim?
Adam never volunteered, I'm sure it wasn't him.
Who pruned all the fruit trees to which Genesis refers?
Did the angel Gabriel have some secateurs?

Who mowed the lawns of Eden? Who kept the garden green?
Eve was not a gardener, and the Cherubs were not keen.
The angels and archangels, they were pretty much the same,
They refused to weed as well as magnify His name.
The Seraphim, they could have helped in several different ways,
But they had all their time used up with singing hymns of praise.
The Heavenly Host was small then, because nobody had died,
But none of them liked digging, even though they'd never tried.
I bet the saints and martyrs would have loved to dig and hoe,
For martyrs up in heaven are the same as here below.

Who mowed the lawns of Eden? Who helped the garden grow?
Who made of it a Paradise? I'll tell you, 'cos I know.
God. He fixed the garden, the first one that he made,
He pruned all the roses, and was handy with his spade.
On Sunday, nice and early He went out to smell the dew.
(There wasn't any Church then, so He'd nothing much to do).
He wandered to the potting-shed, behind the Tree of Life,
And got his spade and trowel out, His fork and pruning knife.
He looked after Eden, and He watched the lilies grow,
And Eden's still a Paradise where gardeners can go.

Who mowed the lawns of Eden? God mowed the lawns and more,
Adam couldn't help Him, for his rib was still quite sore.
The beasts that God created never helped in any way,
The lion lay down with the lamb, bone idle all the day.
God built all the trellises for clematis to climb,
Cut back the wisteria and trained the columbine.
He pruned all the fruit trees: apple, peach and pear,
He had so many jobs to do, you always find Him there.

So if I get to Heaven, I'll just ask Peter if I can
Potter about in Eden, just to help out the Old Man.

It underlines that we always hear words in the context of our own experience. So the word 'garden' is likely to bring to mind the things we have around our own homes, or the splendid gardens we may visit at country houses. They will have the lawns and trellises and all the rest referred to in that song. But we would be quite wrong to think that was what was in the minds of those who wrote that story in Genesis. They simply didn't have our sorts of garden. The Hebrew word apparently means something like 'a walled garden'. In the context of the Middle East, that was the only kind of garden that could be protected from the ravages of the normal heat and sun. We pick that up from New Testament images of the vineyard, which had walls and ditches to protect them. Indeed if we read the words of Genesis carefully, we see that the garden has been created by God out of the uninhabitable wilderness which preceded it.

So first of all, let's reaffirm that God puts humankind into a place of safety and pleasure, a place of plenty and richness. That remains an important thing for us all to keep in mind as we reflect on all the issues of climate change which affect the garden of earth that we inhabit. The man in the story is told to look after it. That is interesting in itself. Sometimes people talk as if work was a punishment that came from the disobedience of the people in the story. But before that happens, the man is told to 'till it and keep it'. Even in the days of Paradise (which is another word for that garden) there are tasks to be done. God gives generously, but he expects our cooperation. We need to reflect on how we are doing that, or failing to do that. Ecology and theology have to go hand in hand. And God's promises to his people are sometimes couched in gardening terms. Isaiah writes that God 'will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord.' And in another place he says that when people return to God 'you shall be like a watered garden.'

But what was in that original garden in the story? Not the lawns and so on of the song. The only things we hear about specifically are trees. Two are mentioned – the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil – the 'apple tree' as it later came to be called (although that isn't what the text says it is). But it isn't that one I want to think about. The other is called 'the Tree of Life'. Probably that stems from ancient thinking about communion and oneness with God. He is the source of all life, including our own. Ezekiel uses that picture of trees to express what returning to God will mean for people – he has a vision of a river with trees on either side. There are different kinds, and will provide fruit for eating, and leaves which will bring healing. The writer of Revelation picks up that idea in his vision of the New Jerusalem. He says 'On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing

of the nations'. We will sing about that in our offertory hymn later. So the story of the Bible starts with the tree of life and ends with it as well.

Perhaps it is no surprise that Christians from the earliest days referred to the cross as 'the tree'. Of course that was literally true, because the cross was made from wood. But it is more than that – it is reminding us that in the Cross we see the way God has provided for us to regain the Paradise, the Eden which he always intended for us, and which was spoilt in that story in Genesis. I reminded you that Genesis never talked about an apple tree, but the mediaevals used that imagery which we hear even today in carols like 'Jesus Christ the Apple Tree.' In Jesus what was spoilt has become good again. Where Paradise was lost, through him Paradise is restored. We reflect about that sometimes when we sing Newman's words 'a second Adam to the fight and to the rescue came.'

Do you remember the encounter Mary Magdalene has with Jesus after the resurrection? He asks why she is weeping, and John writes that 'Supposing him to be the gardener' she asks what he has done with Jesus' body. Again, we can take it at the literal level – it would be reasonable for her to think this person was a gardener. But take a step back. Is it not also true that Jesus really *is* the gardener? It is through his work that we have the tree of life available to us again.

We are now on our annual journey towards the cross. In ten days time we will begin the Lenten part of that journey. We journey towards the tree. The tree of the crucifixion is not a pleasant image. But beyond it and through it we journey towards that vision of the end of time when all will be as God intends, when we are enjoying Paradise, the Garden, as he wants for us. You probably don't know the words of our offertory hymn well. (see below) Can I suggest that after you receive Communion this morning, and perhaps again when you get home, you take some time to read those words through again, and thank God for the tree of life who is Jesus, and for the vision which goes beyond all the mess that we have made of God's garden, and sees it restored and glorious, the Paradise where God's love reaches us and heals us, and brings us the deepest kind of peace and joy.

There in God's garden stands the Tree of wisdom,
whose leaves hold forth the healing of the nations.
Tree of all knowledge, Tree of all compassion,
Tree of all beauty.

Its name is Jesus, name that says, 'Our Saviour!'
There on its branches see the scars of suffering;
see where the tendrils of our human selfhood
feed on its life-blood.

Thorns not its own are tangled in its foliage;
our greed has starved it; our despite has choked it.
Yet look, it lives! Its grief has not destroyed it,
nor fire consumed it.

See how its branches reach to us in welcome;
hear what the voice says, 'Come to me, ye weary!
Give me your sickness, give me all your sorrow.
I will give blessing.'

This is my ending; this my resurrection;
into your hands, Lord, I commit my spirit.
This have I searched for; now I can possess it.
This ground is holy!

All heaven is singing, 'Thanks to Christ, whose Passion
offers in mercy healing, strength and pardon.
All men and nations, take it, take it freely!'
Amen! My Master!