

THE GARDENER

Sermon at the Eucharist on Easter Day

Readings: Acts 10. 34-43; 1 Corinthians 15. 19-26; John 20. 1-18.

NO one has ever mistaken me for a gardener. Gardening, for me, is a strictly spectator sport. Like the *Three Men in a Boat*, it is the sort of work I can sit and look at for hours. Now I know that many of you will tell me how much pleasure and satisfaction I have missed in my life, and how much more fulfilled a person I might have been, had I taken up gardening. I accept that. I know too that in the old stories of the Book of Genesis, the first gardener in the world was God, and there is therefore something godlike about gardening.

The old stories of the Book of Genesis were the stories the disciples of Jesus grew up with. They recounted how, in the dawn of the world, God planted a garden in Eden, and filled it with trees, and in the middle put the tree of life, and made a river well up in the garden; and made the birds and the beasts; and made a man and a woman to look after the garden, to till it and keep it. But the garden was God's; he made it; it was his creation; it was very good; and its name was paradise. The man and the woman, however, fouled God's garden, and God came looking for them 'in the cool of the day', 'at the time of the evening breeze'. God called them, but for shame they hid themselves among the trees of the garden. And paradise became *paradise lost*, and there was no way back to the tree of life.

Thus the old stories; quaint, in some ways, but still resonating with the world we know. And so the long, sad centuries of humanity's exile from paradise go by; and we find ourselves in another garden; more geographically and historically identifiable than the forgotten land of Eden – the edge of Jerusalem in about the year 30. It is the grey dawn, the time of the *morning* breeze, and Mary Magdalen walks among the trees, grief-stricken, bewildered, terrified; for on top of the heart-breaking news of the crucifixion of her Lord, is the fresh outrage that graverobbers seem to have reached the tomb first and left it empty.

A voice addresses her from among the trees, and she thinks it must be the gardener. We think of this as a mistake on Mary's part. It was, after all, a figure seen through a mist of tears, in the twilight of a new day.

But no, Mary was not wholly mistaken. For it *was* a gardener she saw that morning; the Lord God almighty walking among the trees of the garden, and calling by her name, just as he had called Adam and Eve in the morning of the world; the world's first gardener, the maker of paradise. But for Mary he comes not with reproaches, as he did for Adam and Eve, but with good news. Humanity's long exile from the garden is over. The way to the tree of life has been re-opened. 'Today, you will be with me in paradise'. 'Mary'. And Mary does not hide from the Lord in shame among the trees of the garden; she embraces him with joy. 'Teacher'. For what is the resurrection of Jesus but a new creation, the making of a new paradise, the first morning of a new world? So Mary is not mistaken in her recognition of the gardener; as on this first day of the week, the sabbath over, the divine gardener begins work on his new world.

*

'On the third day, he rose again, in accordance with the Scriptures.' There is a more comfortable, and there is a less comfortable, way of believing in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead. The more comfortable way is to relegate the good news to the hereafter. Paradise is where we hope to go where we die. However bad this life is, there is something better to look forward to. Now there is some truth in that, but it is only a part of Christian belief, not the whole of it. 'For anyone united to Christ', wrote Paul to the Corinthians, 'there is a new creation; the old order has gone; a new order has *already begun*'.¹ In other words, God's re-making of the world, God's new creation, paradise not lost but regained, is not something God relegates to the hereafter, but something he began on Easter Day in the year 30 or thereabouts. And the less comfortable way of believing in the resurrection is to look for the signs of God's new creation here and now.

Where do we find the signs of the resurrection of Jesus here and now, in God's new order already begun? I start with the resurrection stories in the gospels, these extraordinary narratives, in which words are stretched to breaking-point to describe the indescribable. I move on to the astonishing outburst of energy among the first followers of Jesus that swept the new faith across the Roman world. Those first followers were fallible people, and Christians have been fallible ever since, with more sinners than

¹ 2 Corinthians 5. 17 (REB).

saints; and yet I find in the lives of those who *are* saints the unmistakable characteristics of Jesus Christ.

Saints; but also the extraordinary goodness in the lives of very ordinary people. I am a firm believer in George Eliot's conclusion to *Middlemarch*: that 'the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs'.

And then there are the actions that speak louder than words, above all this blessed sacrament of holy communion, given to us by Jesus and celebrated ever since as a source of strength and grace. And after a lifetime of meditating on the Bible, I still find in the Bible the story that best explains the world we live in: and it is the story of God taking the world that we have fouled, and setting about, at great cost to himself, to make it again. And that is an uncomfortable faith; for there is so much contrary evidence – a world at war, a world gripped by a pandemic, a world spinning out of environmental control. But in the light of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, I dare to take such signs of hope as there are in the world, and such signs of holiness, and such signs of regeneration, and such signs of what the Bible calls grace, that I don't dismiss them as false dawns, or tricks of the light, or naïve optimism: I take them as the signs that God is at work, and his new order has already begun.

*

I have spoken so far as if the point of an Easter sermon is to encourage *faith* in the resurrection; as if the success of the sermon might be measured by an increase of *belief*. But the point of an Easter sermon, the point of preaching the good news of the resurrection, is to encourage you not so much to *believe* in the resurrection of Jesus more than you did when you woke up this morning, as to *live* the resurrection of Jesus in lives of holiness and grace and effective Christian witness. 'Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father', write Paul to the Romans, 'so we too might walk in newness of life'. It is in *changed lives*, much more than merely *changed minds*, that we see the power of the resurrection at work. And so, you see, we become part of the evidence for the resurrection. Insofar as your life, and my life, show the grace of God at work, we too become part of the sum total of God's new order, of God's re-making of the world.

The Easter story begins with a question of identity: was it the risen Jesus in the garden, or was it only the gardener? And this sermon ends with the same question of identity: is it the risen Jesus who is at work in your life and mine; patiently building his kingdom in your heart and in mine; proving the truth and power of his resurrection by the way you, and I, walk in newness of life?

PETER ATKINSON
Dean of Worcester

Preached at the Sung Eucharist in Worcester Cathedral
on Easter Sunday, 17 April, 2022.

© Peter Atkinson 2022.