

Gardens of the Bible

Jenny: **Welcome**

Many thanks for joining us this fine evening to hear our Talks on Gardens in the Bible, especially as you may have been tempted to enjoy your own gardens during this glorious holiday weekend. I will be saying more about temptations later! Robert can you lead us in our Call to Worship.

Robert: **Call to Worship: many thanks Jenny.**

We gather together this evening in the presence of our God
who calls us each by name
who restores our souls
who leads us in the way of righteousness,
and whose goodness and love never stops pursuing us.
This is the God we have come to worship.

Jenny: **Introduction** The Theme for this Evening's Service came from a re-reading of a poem by Dorothy Frances Gurney (1858-1932) called "The Lord God Planted a Garden". I would like to start by reading this poem. You may well know the poem, especially the last verse.

4 Verses

To follow this poem we will stand and sing "All Things Bright and Beautiful" written by Cecil Frances Alexander (1818-1895) - Hymn Number 137. 4 Verses with Chorus

Robert: Prayer, let us bow down our heads in prayer, being mindful of gardens as harbours of peace and solitude.

Blessed are you, Sovereign God, creator of all, to you be glory and praise for ever. You founded the earth in the beginning and the heavens are the work of your hands. In the fullness of time you made us in your image. As we rejoice in the gift of your presence among us let the light of your love always shine in our hearts, your Spirit ever renew our lives and your praises ever be on our lips. As our Evening Prayer rises before you O God, so may your mercy come down upon us to cleanse our hearts and set us up to sing your praise. Blessed be to God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now and for ever Amen.

Jenny: **Talk:** The Garden of Eden

The Poem 'The Lord God Planted a Garden' gave us the idea of exploring gardens in the Bible. There are numerous references to Gardens in the Bible but perhaps the most prominent and well known is The Garden of Eden.

There is even a clear indication in Genesis as to where Eden lies. Scholars have proposed several possibilities, including Mesopotamia, Syria, Turkey and Armenia. Genesis mentions the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, which both flow into the Persian Gulf via Turkey, Syria and Iraq.

In contrast, it is interesting to note that the beliefs of the Panacea Society, a remarkable religious community formed in the early 20th Century with its headquarters based in Castleside Gardens, Bedford. According to the beliefs of the Panacea Society, the Castleside Gardens stand on the site of the original Garden of Eden. The belief was part of the Society's religious understanding of the place where they lived, and where they would witness the coming millennium. To them, Bedford had both a historic and future significance.

In Genesis we hear how God creates the Garden by bringing up streams from the earth and filling up the ground with plants "that are pleasing to the eye and good for food". According to the Bible, the Garden of Eden is perfection itself – a place of beauty and abundance, free of disease, death and evil, into which God sets Adam, the pinnacle of His creation.

There are two Trees in the middle of the Garden – "The Tree of Life" and "The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil". God creates Adam and Eve to manage and tend the Garden and, at first, they are very content with their bountiful lives and observe faithfully God's one prohibition: they are free to eat the fruit from the Tree of Life, which grants them immortality. However, to eat the fruit from the mysterious Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil will be on pain of certain death. Until their disobedience, Adam and Eve live and work in Paradise, enjoying a close relationship with each other and with God.

Robert: From Genesis 1:29-31 – "God said, See I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food, And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good."

Robert: Let us stand and sing Hymn No 62 by Sarah B Rhodes (1829-1904): "God who made the earth, the air, the sky, the sea, who gave the light its birth – God cares for me." Three verses.

Jenny: Talk:Troubles in the Garden

The Garden of Eden must have been delightful! No thorns, brambles, thistles, diseases, weeds, death or decay.

Then, the serpent whispers into Eve's ear and it causes her to doubt God.

Robert: (Genesis 3: 1-6) Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman "Did God say "you shall not eat from any tree in the garden? The Woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it or you shall die. But the serpent said to the woman 'You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.

Jenny: Eve is easily persuaded to eat the forbidden fruit and gives some to Adam. Immediately, the couple see that they are naked. Ashamed, they sew fig leaves together to cover themselves and hide. God's punishment came swiftly and Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden.

Jenny and Robert play-acting "who is to blame?"

RT Look at the mess you have got us into now. We were having a great time in the Garden and now it is all over. "She gave me some fruit from the tree and I ate it". Jenny: It wasn't all my fault – "The snake deceived me and I ate." RT: Why did you listen to that crafty old serpent and not trust God. I know you don't believe any thing I tell you but you might have trusted God. Jenny: I was only trying to please you and share the lovely fruit. Robert: You might have known I never refuse any food you offer to me. Robert turning to the congregation: that's the Garden of Eden destroyed, It's a good job there is no one else around to witness our shame. I am sure you will agree that it is all her fault.

Jenny: right Robert that's enough of the play-acting a lot of which was not scripted and agreed with me in any case! Later, Adam admits to eating the fruit but blames Eve. Christianity has traditionally blamed Eve – and all womankind- for the Fall from God's grace, and seen her as degenerate, morally weak, and subordinate to man.

It is not easy to understand the complexities of this story or why God apparently led the serpent to tempt Eve but for Christians the exercise of free will is central to the story of the Fall. Adam and Eve's actions show that human beings have the freedom to make poor choices but that there is a price to pay.

Genesis itself, however, does not attribute blame for the Fall. On the contrary, it indicates that Adam is present when the serpent speaks to Eve and receives equal punishment, suggesting that they are both culpable.

Robert: Let us stand and sing Hymn Number No 41 by FS Pierpoint (1835-1917): For the beauty of the earth.

Robert: Talk: The Gardens of Gethsemane and Golgotha.

Two other prominent Gardens are those of Gethsemane and Golgotha. After the Last Supper, Jesus retires to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. There he is “deeply distressed and troubled”, and tells his disciples: “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” (Mark 14:34). Jesus knows that the end is near, and indeed, the Garden of Gethsemane is the place where Jesus is betrayed by one of His own followers, Judas Iscariot. Judas leads the Temple guards to Jesus in the garden, betraying Him with a kiss. At that time a kiss was a significant gesture often given as a sign of honour and respect. Gardens are seen as a special place in the ancient Near East. Gardens – especially those in the desert- which were understood as places where the divine can interact with the earthly. Adam and Eve’s betrayal of God leads to death entering the world, while Judas’s betrayal of Jesus leads to Him conquering death.

Jenny: After the trial and the judgement to crucify Jesus He is taken by the Roman guards to a publicly visible hill called Golgotha also known as Calvary just outside the city wall. Let us remember this place by singing Hymn 223 “There is a green hill far far away”

Jenny: Talk: The Garden Tomb

As Jesus hangs dead on the cross, the Jewish authorities ask the soldiers to finish off the crucifixions and take down the bodies before nightfall. Two Jewish noblemen and scholars, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus then get Pilate’s permission to take Jesus’s body for burial in Joseph’s Garden Tomb. Anointed in sweet spices and wrapped in linen, Jesus’s body is sealed in the tomb by a stone late on Good Friday afternoon.

Robert: According to John Chapter 19 - “Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb (John 19:41).”

Jenny: The Sunday morning after Jesus’s grief-stricken friends have observed the Saturday Sabbath, Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of the Apostle James and another woman called Salome visit the tomb to embalm Jesus’s body, according to Jewish custom. When the women arrive at the tomb, they are astonished to see that it is already open. Wondering who has arrived

before them, they look inside – but there is no one there. John’s Gospel focuses on Mary Magdalene’s experience that morning. She stays by the tomb and then sees a man near her and, presuming Him to be the gardener, says “Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have put Him. Through her tears, Mary does not recognise Jesus until He speaks her name. Jesus gently tells her to return to the other disciples to share the news of His Resurrection. Mary’s mistake, thinking Jesus was a gardener, is a profound discovery: just as God planted the Garden of Eden at the beginning of the Bible, now, through Jesus, God is restoring that Garden.

Mary’s experience in the garden can be related in this poem by Mary Coleridge:

Poem: When Mary through the garden went

Robert: The fourth garden is called “the Paradise of God,” a figurative description of heaven from the Book of Revelation Chapter 2:7. The word “paradise” means a park, a place of pleasure. The word is found in the Greek translation of Genesis Chapter 2 verse 8, describing the Garden of Eden: Paradeisos. Jesus used the same word in describing heaven: “To him who overcomes, to him I will give to eat of the tree of life in the Paradise of God” (Revelation 2:7). This heaven is pictured as a restored Garden of Eden. The “tree of life”, on “both sides of a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, is in the restored garden bearing twelve fruits monthly. (Revelation 22:1-2) The curse placed on the original Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:17-19) will be gone forever, for in the “Paradise of God” there shall be no curse anymore, now, through Jesus, God is restoring that Garden.

Jenny: Poem – repeat of 4th Verse

Talk: Are people really closest to God in a garden?

We have discovered instances in the Bible where Jesus himself has retreated to a quiet place or garden for contemplation, but should we take this verse too literally. Many of us enjoy, or indeed, have a great need sometimes, to find solitude in gardens or hills or lakes or sea, where we feel there is space and time for peace and contemplation. But the idea that we are nearer to God’s heart in a garden has been construed by some people as not needing the support of clergy and the Church.

This idea in itself gives much ‘food for thought’! Perhaps, for discussion on another occasion.

Meanwhile, having prepared this service, I found that, in 2014, the Very Reverent Dean of Westminster, John Hall, gave a sermon based on this poem and there are copies of this sermon available if you are interested.

In closing, let us stand and sing Hymn Number 117 "O Lord my God How great thou art" in celebration and praising the God of Creation. 4 verses

Robert:

Blessing

Glory to God the father
The unbegotten One
All honour be to Jesus,
His sole be-gotten Son,
And to the Holy Spirit
The perfect Trinity
Let all the worlds give answer
Amen, so let it be