



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

1 March 2020: Choral Eucharist

The First Sunday of Lent

Genesis 2:15–17; 3:1–7, Romans 5:12–19, Matthew 4:1–11

The Revd Canon Graham Ward, Regius Professor of Divinity

‘Paradise’

I have an image in my head of a bank of violets in the sunshine. They are such fragile flowers, but strong in their colour, their scent light and sweet. I came across them on the day after storm Ciara. The storm had brought down one of the large trees in the Meadow and so the usual path was closed as the works department set to with chain saws. Walkers were directed around the far side of the Meadow at the back of the Music Faculty. And that’s where they are, flourishing in abundance in what looks like a small heap of waste materials where the nettles are rising.

It’s a small thing; a quiet beauty, but I keep returning to it because sometimes Lent arrives as a misery too far. So many people in the country are struggling with floodwaters, their homes and businesses sodden and destroyed. So many are anxious about the coronavirus, cancelling travel plans, watching the news for new outbreaks, hoping for containment. Any Christmas indulgences are well and truly in the past; and here comes the season of self-loathing. So the small beauties like the two pairs of white swans skimming the surface of the flooded plain, the sound of a woodpecker in the trees by the Botanical Gardens, the rascal antics of a squirrel chasing the food a magpie has found, are each little, mundane graces; intimations of a paradise lost.

This morning’s lessons offer us two of the most powerful stories in the Western literary canon: the story of the Fall of Adam and Eve in Paradise and the story of the temptation of Christ in the wilderness. The effects of these stories on the imagination down through the centuries have been profound. Up and down the country in churches where these lessons are being read, on this first Sunday of Lent, there will, no doubt, be sermons about sin, salvation in Christ, and resisting temptation. It may seem slightly strange then that I’m going to sideline these key teachings of the church at the beginning of Lent and focus elsewhere: on paradise. Lost, as I said, but momentarily regained.

“The Lord God planted a garden, eastward in Eden; and there he put the man who he had formed.” That’s not part of our lesson this morning. It comes earlier. And, of course, though there was a fertile crescent curving down from what is now northern Turkey and Uzbekistan through the war-torn zones of Syria, then Lebanon, Israel, Jordan and into Egypt, there never was a paradise, historically. The story in Genesis is not part of a chronological history. It is an imagined history; a myth far more powerful than chronological history because it has worked on the human imagination. It tells us something about God; and much about ourselves. It is a paradise lost to us, but one never found, never inhabited. All paleoanthropologists have uncovered, tells us of many forms of being human that foraged, flourished for a time, and were effaced. Human life has been an endless struggle against their environments and against themselves and the other species of themselves. Any settled condition only appeared relatively recently – around 12,000 years ago. So why do we feel - deeply, imaginatively, existentially feel - we have lost something; and the losing of it is our fault?

The myth – and I don’t mean that in a put-down way – the myth of the Garden of Eden tells us about a deep human longing, and its loss tells us about a deep human lack. Myths are cultural dreams; expressing our longings and our fears. What the Garden of Eden evokes is a past we have never lived and yet profoundly want to. It speaks about our sense of being created – but what for and for whom we don’t know. But we know what it is to create ourselves – the delight, the freedom, the sense that it is good. We know too what it is to destroy and we are wary of the violence unleashed in acts of destruction. What is in our reading for this morning is this: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.” If God “planted” Paradise, then we who are created in God’s image imitate something about God’s nature in our tilling and tending and keeping. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” (Psalm 23). We too in our creativity shepherd, care for and try to provide. Following this verse about God putting us in the Garden to tend it, there is one of the most startlingly original pieces of mythical thinking. The idea behind it is found nowhere else in the ancient world. It’s a piece that has been edited out for us in this morning’s lectionary readings, because the lectionary wants us to contemplate our sinfulness this first Sunday in Lent. Our sinfulness is a central teaching of the Church and, when we’re honest with ourselves we know more than enough about our sinfulness. Lord, have mercy upon us. But an equally decisive teaching of the Church is our salvation, and the Garden of Eden is a cultural dream of what it might mean to be saved; to live consonant with the rest of creation and our

Creator. So the edited piece is very important because it describes how Adam, tilling and tending, draws all the animals to himself that they might be named and known, and that he might seek out among them one who might partner him. He doesn't find that partner, of course, but the intimacy between the human and the animal kingdom often occurs in the Hebrew Bible as glimpses of Paradise: the lion lying down with the lamb; the child playing over the snake's nest.

God loves us and God saves us from ourselves. God is both our creator and our redeemer. There are intimations of Paradise in every garden we enjoy and care for (and no one knows this more than Muslims); in every creative contribution we make to both the natural world and the cultural world. The music we compose and sing; the poetry we read and write; the scientific search for truth about creation; and every act of goodness we affect. These things enact an Eden that will be and in brief moments is. Yes, sin vitiates it. Sin announces our inability to participate in God's goodness towards us and to practice it. But sin is not the final point of the story of Adam, Eve, the Trees of Knowledge and Life, the snake, and Paradise. The final point is salvation; healing; something which we dream of as a human species and we know is possible - like a deeply spiritual hope written into us by our very ability to breathe. Among the waste and nettles on the Meadow there is a bank of violets – and they speak to me of Christ's overwhelming provision. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Just like the table set before us with bread and wine.