

A sermon preached by the Bishop of Coventry on Easter Day 2017 in Coventry Cathedral

Readings: Acts 10.34-43 and John 20. 1018

Introduction: A tale of two gardens

‘Early on the first day of week’: St John, the gospel writer, is telling us something important. A new day in a new week. A day of new beginnings. The beginning of a new beginning in John’s gospel that began with the words, ‘In the beginning was the Word’. The beginning of a new chapter that echoes, like his first chapter, the beginning of Genesis, the first book of the bible that begins: ‘In the beginning when God created’.

This day is a day of new creation. This is the day of the remaking of humanity. And like the unmaking of humanity through the fall of Adam and Eve, the remaking through the rising of Jesus takes place in a garden.

Peace to Mary in the garden

I’ve become very interested in gardens since coming to Coventry. We live in Church property. It has a big garden. I’ve discovered the joys of vegetable gardening but the rest of the garden is too much for me to look after properly so we asked a gardener to help us.

The garden looked fairly impressive to most people – quite big with lots of green – but to her gardener’s skilled eyes it was lifeless: no colour, no scent, no shape – one bush merging into another, the ground covered in dark ivy, thorns everywhere. No new life at all.

She set about clearing it, removing the debris, cutting down what didn’t belong. She soon began to discover that there was more to the garden than met the eye. ‘I’ve found a spring border’, she said.

‘Someone planned this garden very carefully and someone ruined it. But it will be okay with some food and love’.

Her aim has been to restore what was once very beautiful. Actually, it was even more ambitious. To resurrect what was hidden in darkness and bring it into an even more glorious life than it had before.

Her strategy was simple – to let in light and warmth, wind and water, and a little feed.

The first thing I noticed were the roses. They looked like sad sticks to me but to the gardener’s eyes they were a prestigious French variety planted over fifty years ago, perhaps for the consecration of the new cathedral. Now they are standing tall, full of greenery and buds. Then the blossom on trees shrouded by self-setters or suffocated by ivy till she set about her work. Now magnolias dancing, laden with blossom, and cherry trees as radiant as brides.

In one especially unpromising bed she said, ‘You don’t know what seeds are lying below the surface that will suddenly burst into life’ as it feels the warmth of the sun, the dew of the morning, the reviving breath of the wind over it. This glorious spring the most beautiful ‘Forget me Nots’ have sprung through the surface with a dazzling splash of blue.

Jesus had been very clear that forces of evil were gathering around him to betray him, kill him and bury him in the ground. But he also implored his followers: ‘Forget me not’, for just as surely as God brings the buried seed into new life, so God will raise me up on the third day.

Mary Magdalene had forgotten his promise. Who could blame her. It seemed so unlikely. She stood in the garden, weeping with grief – a grief made all the more unbearable because someone – perhaps a cruel soldier or maybe this gardener who was bothering her with his questions: ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?’ But then he called her name: ‘Mary’. The voice she knew so well, and loved, especially when it spoke her name with such love.

Yes, this was the gardener: the master gardener who had grown life out of death. Life that brought her peace and gave her purpose. Life that brought her joy and gave her reason to live. ‘I have seen the Lord’, she announced to the disciples, says St John. And she announces the same to us this morning.

Peace in the world

Peter was with Mary Magdalene in the garden on that first Easter Day but it took him longer to see the risen Christ. He too had wept bitterly in the darker days of Jesus’ death and something died within him when he denied his friend and master. But Jesus restored him to life by giving him a work for life.

And we see that life’s work in action in our reading from the book Acts. Here is Peter in the adventure of serving the risen Christ. He has just seen the abundance of God’s life fill a group of gentile people as God’s Spirit fell on non Jews bringing them too to life, new life through the risen Christ.

Peter summarising the message and meaning of Jesus said: ‘God preached peace to his people Israel and this message is spreading out throughout the world because Jesus is Lord of all’.

That's very compact. Let me amplify. The peace that Jesus brought to the Jewish woman Mary Magdalene in a first century garden in Jerusalem is a peace that is for everyone in every place in every century. The peace that only God can give – peace with God, peace with each other, peace with the earth.

Even more than that – this is a peace not just for individuals but for nations: it is peace for the world, peace between nations, peace even between humanity and the very earth, the environment in which we live. Peace that is personal – yes. But peace that is also public.

What can this mean for our world?

Our world that is in danger. A world where Syria plunges deeper into hell and where the great powers of the United States and the Russian Federation that should be aligned to bring peace are lining up against each other.

A world where crazed, deluded fanatics mow down ordinary people going about their lives in Nice and Paris, Berlin, London and Stockholm.

A world where the best we can do is to drop the third biggest bomb the world has known in a desperate attempt to suck out the air that they breathe.

A world where nuclear powers are once again threatening each other with mass destruction.

A world that seems more volatile this year than last.

A world with leaders with big egos to satisfy and large muscles to flex.

What has this garden scene in Jerusalem and the new found peace of a weeping woman in the light of a new day to do with a world darkened by such danger?

Everything - according to Peter. For Jesus is the 'Lord of all' and 'the one ordained to judge the living and the dead', he tells us. It is his ways – the ways of Jesus – by which the nations will be judged and his ways by which they will find the peace that he came to bring.

The ways of the gardener.

The Gardener who opens the earth to the light of truth for without the truth there is no peace. Did we not learn that in Iraq in 2003?

The Gardener who waters the earth – water that every living creature needs, water of a shared humanity that must cooperate together for a common cause: there will be no peace in Syria unless the US and the rest cooperate with Russia; and no peace in the East unless the West cooperates with China, recognising our common humanity.

The Gardener who clears the undergrowth so that air can revive the soil, the air of conversation that maintains relationships, develops understanding, literally airs grievances, grows common narratives for peace. Does not the history of our Cathedral tell the world that when enemies relate they begin to reconcile?

Conclusion: the answer to our questions

The first words spoken by the Jesus in John's gospel were: 'what are looking for?'. We are looking for peace. Peace with God, peace with each other, peace with the earth. Personal peace and public peace.

The first words spoken by the risen Christ in John's gospel are 'Whom are you looking for?'

The peace for which we yearn: Peace with God, peace with each other, peace with the earth, peace on earth. Personal peace for each person; public peace for our world are to be found in the word and ways and works of Jesus Christ, for he is the Lord of all and Judge of the living and the dead.

Let us not suppose that Jesus and his questions are irrelevant to our needs.

But let us see that the risen Jesus, with his questions and the power of his resurrected life is the source of our hope and the solution to our deepest problems, personal and public. For he is the gardener of our souls and the Master Gardener of all creation.