

Seeing God in the Beauty of a Garden.

There has been a heretical tradition that has haunted Christianity almost since its start and which has gone by different names at different times - Dualism, Gnosticism, Manicheism, Albigensianism, Jansenism, etc. One of the key elements of which has been to see physical creation as evil and a barrier to be overcome in the battle to free our spirits so that they can rise to heaven. Even though this has never been the orthodox teaching of the Church, which points to an essentially good but fallen creation that is redeemed in Christ, the influence of this heresy has been strong.

It so happens that the order to which I belong, the Dominicans, was founded specifically out of the need to counter this position. For the Albigensian heretics that were growing in influence and number in the Southern part of France at the time of St Dominic, the world and the flesh were irredeemable because they had been created by a satanic lesser god, the god of the Old Testament. The aim of the human person was to as quickly as possible move towards the greater God, the God of the New Testament – the God of Spirit. To release the spirit from the flesh in which it was entrapped. A denial of the Incarnation, belief in the evil of sex and a belief that under certain circumstances suicide was commendable were part of the package.

To counter this the Dominicans preached the Truth that through the Incarnation God in Christ unites the creation to himself. He is in His death, resurrection and ascension, the gateway for us to share in the Divine life of Love. And He gives us the means and shows us the way to enable us to follow Him - in the Holy Spirit, the Church and the new Commandment of Grace - to 'Love the Lord our God... and our Neighbour as ourselves'. Whereas the heretics hate the World, we are called to love it!

One of the achievements of St Thomas Aquinas, one of those early Dominicans, was the philosophical/theological rehabilitation of Aristotle. Before Aquinas the greatest classical influence on Christianity was Plato who taught that "if we are ever to have pure knowledge of anything, we must get rid of the body and contemplate things by themselves with the

soul itself.” Instead Aristotle pointed to how much we can learn from the things we see around us - so, we can come to see God in his creation reflected in Goodness when we witness it, in Truth when it is told and Beauty when we behold it. Of these Beauty is probably the most easily accessible - think of the beauty of a landscape, of a wonderful sunset or of a gothic cathedral perhaps. But can I suggest that there is somewhere else where we can both contemplate God in Beauty and participate in his creation.

Ever since Adam and Eve walked in the presence of the Lord in the Garden of Eden gardens have been places where we can come closer to God. Think of the fact that Jesus himself, when facing the ultimate sacrifice, chose a garden, Gethsemane, to commune with his Father and their shared Spirit. The Desert Fathers are known to have tended their gardens. medieval monks too, found that gardens were invaluable, both in terms of producing food and medicine and as places of contemplation.

It's not surprising then, that in difficult times such as we face today and faced particularly in the forced isolation of Covid, many have found solace in their gardens. The TV programme 'Gardeners World' has highlighted this by sharing videos from all across the world made by ordinary people for whom their gardens have been invaluable for their spiritual, mental and physical well-being.

So too for my wife Allison and myself. The Chaplaincy Garden is a place where we are able to come closer to God through a sharing in his creation in the act of gardening itself (Allison is the head gardener), through his creatures that live there and visit (so far we've counted around 40 species of birds), through contemplating the sheer beauty of some of the plants and flowers, and in savouring the taste and freshness of the vegetables we've grown.

We also have a number of religious statues to remind us of whose garden it really is. A statue of the Madonna and Child, one of St Francis with turtle doves and a small dog, and a bird-bath where a pair of hands, perhaps those of God, cup and cherish a small bird. My favourite though is the small statue of a Medieval Monk, breviary in hand to remind us of

the importance of worship and right praise, who behind his back also holds a tankard of ale. A reminder of the Catholic teaching that all of Creation is at heart good, and that God gives us this to tend it and delight in it. Some of the best beers have been, and still are, brewed by monks!

So next time you have the opportunity, try to spend a little time in a garden, whether it is your own or a public garden, contemplate its beauty, have a beer - and Thanks be to God!

