

**Leaving the garden: An ancient story, reread in a time of crisis. St Paul's
September 18 2022. Keith Rowe.`**

Reading: Genesis 2: the story of the garden and the unwilling gardeners translated by Jewish scholar Robert Alter (selections):

On the day the Lord God made earth and heavens, no shrub of the field being yet on the earth and no plant of the field yet sprouted, for the Lord God had not caused rain to fall on the earth and there was no human to till the soil, and wetness would well from the earth to water all the surface of the soil, then the Lord God fashioned the human, humus from the soil, and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living creature. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, to the east, and he placed there the human He had fashioned. And the Lord God caused to sprout from the soil every tree lovely to look at and good for food, and the tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge, good and evil.

*And the Lord God took the human and set him down in the garden of Eden to till it and watch it. And the Lord God commanded the human saying, "From every fruit of the garden you may surely eat. But from the tree of knowledge, good and evil, you shall not eat, for on the day you eat it you are doomed to die." And the Lord God said, "it is not good for the human to be alone; I shall make him a sustainer beside him."
(And so, Eve was created from the rib of the human.)*

"Now the serpent was the most cunning of all the beasts of the field that the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, "Though God said, you shall not eat from any tree of the garden – "And the woman said to the serpent, "From the fruit of the garden's trees we may eat, but not from the fruit of the tree in the midst of the garden God has said, 'You shall not eat from it and you shall not touch it, lest you die.'" And the serpent said to the woman, "You shall not be doomed to die. For God knows that on the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will become as gods knowing good and evil." And the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and it was lust to the eyes and the tree was lovely to look at, and she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave it to her man, and he ate. And the eyes of the two were opened, and they knew they were naked.

And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking about in the garden in the evening breeze, and the human and his woman hid from the Lord God in the midst of the trees in the garden. And the Lord God called to the human and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said "I heard your sound in the garden and I was afraid for I was naked, and I hid." (The human and his woman each blame the other and the serpent for what they have done.) And the Lord God made skin coats for the human and his woman, and He clothed them. And the Lord God said, "Now that the human has become like one of us, knowing good and evil, he may reach out and take as well from the tree of life and to live forever." And the Lord God sent him from the Garden of Eden to till the soil from which he had been taken.

It's time to take up again the issue of how we interpret the environmental crisis and climate change that is set to change a great deal of what we have regarded as normal and may even bring human civilisation as we have known it to an end.

The Hebrew Bible begins with two creation stories. The first (Gen 1:1-2:3) imagines the world being created over a six-day period by a craftsman God who shaped the world from a pre-existing meaningless mess into an ordered and inter connected system. On completion of the task God rests and leaves the continuing care of earth to the human family. The second story (2:4-3:24) imagines the world being created as a beautiful garden tended by the first human, an Adam, who was shaped from the same earth, water and God-Spirit that sustained the plants in the garden. The beauty of these two ancient tales, 'myths' is the technical term, is that over the centuries they have provided frameworks for understanding who we are and who we might become. A leading Biblical scholar says of this tale, "While the garden story is not historical in a literal sense it is paradigmatic of human history. It illuminates a dynamic of human history that repeats itself time again, namely a tendency to grasp for power in ways that result in tragedy." Today I want to re enter the Garden of Eden story in search of ways of understanding and responding to the environmental and climatic crisis that is enveloping humanity in our time. The crisis is so severe it is likely, according to the best scientific evidence, to lead to the end of human civilisation, as we have known it, or at least to dramatically modify human living. Few things will be unchanged as humanity learns to reinvent itself in a dramatically changed era.

It might seem strange to turn to an ancient book for wisdom in our science-based world. But in times of crisis humans have always turned to their most ancient wisdom in search of life-giving meaning. Over and over these ancient writings, often preserved in set apart 'holy books' like the Bible, have provided direction in times of confusion, hope in times of despair and meaning in times of uncertainty. So, today I invite you to re-enter the story of the Garden of Eden and the refusal of Adam to accept his God appointed role within the garden. I am not an impartial reader of this ancient tale. I am deeply troubled, sometimes afraid, of what the remaining decades of our century will bring. I read this story as a concerned, troubled, twenty first century citizen.

We know the story of the imagined events in the Garden of Eden. First thing to notice is that the natural world and the human race (represented by Adam) are formed from the same material – the dust or clay of the earth, infused and given meaning by the breath (spirit) of God. The name 'Adam' is a play on the Hebrew word 'Adamah', meaning the ground, the clay or the soil. (Note the similarity between the English words Human and Humus. Adam (used as a personal name) can also be translated as "The Human" or "The Groundling". Humanity belongs within nature. It is our home –we depend on it; it depends on us. The Garden of Eden is the earth as it could be – beautiful, fertile, life giving. While original readers of our garden tale thought of it as a cultural memory of what once was, others in later times, interpreted it as a dream of what could be if we lived more consistently within the purposes of

God –more like a task to be accomplished, a gift to be received, than an event to be remembered.

For us, in our time of crisis, it is surely a reminder of something we have lost.

For about 11,000 years our planet and the human family have lived within what geologists call the Holocene Period. During these years the climatic conditions on earth have been ideal for human flourishing. A stable, relatively warm climate has been ideal for human life and for the development of agriculture and the production of food to feed an expanding population. It has been like a Garden of Eden period in human evolution. It's the period when our civilisation developed and flourished. But the years of Holocene comfort have passed and we have entered into a new geological era experts call the Anthropocene (from the Greek word 'anthropos', the human). The Anthropocene era is dominated by the actions of humans in shaping the earth. Human impact on the environment has always been present but from about the 17th century human influence on the environment became increasingly destructive. The 18th century industrial revolution depended on the use of fossil fuels like coal and later oil to maintain the comfort of the already wealthy classes. Slaves were shipped from Africa and Asian countries to provide slave labour for agricultural and industrial development. Food was now grown for sale rather than to be shared. Trees, so important in releasing oxygen into the atmosphere, were cut down to enable livestock farming which in turn released excess methane into the atmosphere. Rivers and lakes began to be polluted as waste products were dumped.

About the middle years of the twentieth century the rate of destructive environmental change accelerated. Researchers describe this as the 'Great Acceleration'. A greed based economic system literally ravished the environment in search of raw materials and gorged itself on the uncontrolled use of carbon-based fossil fuels that poured carbon dioxide into the atmosphere at a level the seas and the air could not manage. A dramatic and catastrophic rise in atmospheric and ocean temperatures followed. The tragic results are unfolding around us. We have become a people expelled from our Garden of Eden. From the 1960's Scientists warned us of what was happening. Wealthy international corporations who benefitted from the ill-disciplined use of fossil fuels cast doubt on scientific research. If we gave them a role in the Garden story, they would be the snake who misled Eve. We have good reason to be grateful for prophets and scientists, greenies and activists, who warned us we were leaving our Garden of Eden and there is no going back. What we have done we have done.

Some suggest **we may be living in the time of 'the 6th extinction'**. On 5 occasions over the last 444 million years most of the dominant species on our earth have become extinct because of an ice age or volcanic activity. The most recent was caused by an asteroid collision 66 million years ago when the dinosaurs were wiped out. If there is a 6th extinction (of humanity) it will be as a direct result of calculated yet foolish human activity. We have learned the hard way that 'human involvement in an ecosystem almost always impoverishes it.' We have an ongoing tendency to crap in our Gardens of Eden.

So, what went wrong? Does our Genesis tale help us? I think it does. Adam, along with Eve (whose name means life giver) were appointed to be gardeners in the Garden of Eden, to continue the creative work of the Divine gardener. But they were restless and ambitious, they wanted to expand their knowledge and power to the point where they could become their own god – the ultimate rule makers, the ones whose very being would be celebrated and worshipped. It all sounds so contemporary – the persistent human desire to be our own god, to organise life around our own personal or group comfort and to ignore how our profligacy affects the worlds of other people and of nature. The ancient story tells it as it is: there’s a profound insecurity and selfishness in humanity that means we would rather be gods than gardeners. The task of a gardener is to build beauty, to care for trees, animals, rivers and lakes as though they were companions rather than competitors. Adam and Eve imagined that if they became gods then there would be no boundaries to what they could do. They would be like the King of Babylon, all-powerful, surrounded by comfort, power and possessions. This identification of God as like a powerful ruler has cast a deep shadow over the human story. Twentieth century philosopher Alfred North Whitehead got it right when he wrote: “The church gave unto God the attributes that belonged exclusively to Caesar” and sadly ignored “the tender elements in the world, which slowly and in quietness operate by love.” These tender elements sound remarkably like the qualities of a divine gardener tilling the soil and drawing beauty from clay as in our Genesis story.

The desire to be our own god has never left the human psyche. As a group, humans, particularly in the western world, have in recent centuries chosen to exploit both neighbour and nature. Both would be better off if we were to let go of the desire to be God! Just let it go! Let go of any ambition to rule over neighbours or to reshape nature, to serve our own comfort and greed above all else. We are born to be gardeners not gods - builders of beauty, relationship and justice, not accumulators of power. So, our two would be gods, Adam and Eve, were ejected from the garden, left to wander in search of truth – shaped by a foolish search to be gods rather than gardeners.

Our story ends with a question as to what happens to the man of the earth and the life-giving woman, the gardeners who sought to be gods. Henceforth, we are told, tilling the land from which they were taken will become a burden rather than a privilege. Our two characters are like a mirror image of twenty first century humanity caught in a crisis of our own making. As the story unfolds beyond the garden it is clear that God, rather like a gardener casually walking around his garden in the evening breeze, follows them wherever they travel. At times it feels like they are engaged in a living conversation with this questioning, mysterious, yet life giving presence. Over and over, they feel themselves to be re -invited to apply for the position of gardeners and become builders of beauty. The whispered divine question is heard across the centuries, “Adam, Eve, where are you?” but the seductive ambition to be gods instead of gardeners is hard to escape from. They know that life would be better for nature and for neighbour if they could let go of the desire to be gods rather than caretakers, but the desire to control both neighbour and nature seems to have become embedded in the human psyche. Centuries later another story

was told of the prophet Jesus who during a first century political, economic and spiritual crisis, jolted people out of self-concern and taught them to live from the human possibility of caring for neighbour and for the world in which their neighbour lives. The Way he pioneered, re-expressed in ways that make sense in our day and within our challenges, is needed if we are to find meaning, community, and compassion for nature and for neighbour in the decades that lie before us. Our human task is not to be god but rather to be human: gardeners rather than gods.

The human search for knowledge of good and evil continues, as it must. We continue to learn from the tree of life. When it becomes a search for knowledge to control or to dominate, life descends into conflict - when new knowledge is accompanied by sensitivity to wonder and awareness of mystery things go better. Like picking an apple from an unknown tree new knowledge should be received with humility, a sense of wonder and a gentle prayer that it will be used to enhance both neighbour and nature, never to dominate or control.

What do you think?

FOR REFLECTION:

*It's time to return from our conversation with an ancient story and to identify some questions we might have brought back from our journey into the Genesis Garden.

*We now live in the Holocene era – a time, for the first time in human evolution when we are learning to cope with human misuse of nature. What treasures do we take with us from the past as we adjust to living in these new circumstances?

*Is it true that it is the human desire to be gods that has brought us to this crisis point? Can we escape from this perversion of human possibility? How?

*Where will we find support in escaping from the collective desire to be gods? Is this what the Way pioneered by Jesus represents – an escape from the desire to be gods and instead to become servants of human community.

*How will we share this important insight with those for whom the word 'God' no longer has meaning? Reflect on the quote from Alfred North Whitehead.

*How will we live within the Jesus Way in the tough decades ahead? What from that Way will be most needed by our neighbourhoods, our world and us in this time of crisis?