

Reflections and Prayers: a nation of gardeners

This is the 7th of a series of weekly Reflections and Prayers being offered to the Norley Methodist Church congregation and to colleagues and friends in many places near and far. They are sourced from a variety of people. You are invited to use them for personal reflection and to share and retain them as you wish.

Morning has broken.....



You are awake, you have drawn back the curtains, perhaps looking out on your garden: God has created a new day and the birds are singing in innocent and unconditional celebration. Now join in and sing (you know the lovely tune, Bunesan, named after a village on the Scottish island of Mull):

‘Sweet the rain’s new fall sunlit from heaven,
like the first dewfall on the first grass.
Praise for the sweetness of the wet garden
sprung in completeness where his feet pass.’

If you’d like to sing all three verses, turn to Methodist StF 136 or URC Rejoice and Sing 45.

Photo in Biddulph Grange Garden, Staffordshire, October 2019

Gardens and gardening – some reflections

The title this week is taken from an article in The Economist newspaper (May 2nd 2020) which suggests that gardens and gardening can play an important role in sustaining physical and mental health during this time of crisis and lockdown: surveys indicate that between eight and nine Britons out of ten have a private garden. Perhaps those without them cultivate in window boxes and the like, as the Swiss do on their south-facing chalet balconies.



The prime minister has just announced a very modest relaxation of the lockdown which permits us to spend time in parks (why ever were some closed? ditto, garden centres) and we look forward to the day when National Trust and similar gardens may re-open. Normally, people would now be flocking to attractions such as Bodnant in North Wales, Nymans in West Sussex and Craggside in Northumberland to admire the vast arrays of stunningly colourful rhododendrons. All is not lost – this photo was taken on Norley Road, Cuddington, last week.

Last Sunday, May 10th, was Garden Day, when people had to visit each other’s gardens virtually rather than in person, or perhaps inspect them from the road whilst on their once daily exercise outings. Most garden owners had plenty of time to prepare them this year: lawns beautifully manicured, edges and hedges trimmed to the centimetre, flowers and plants lovingly coaxed and tended, paths free of alien weeds and moss.

It is evident that many people have turned to their gardens as a solace and a therapy because they offer a purposeful and optimistic activity.

Imagining that those unremarkable seeds will be transformed into bright, blooming flowers requires some faith in the future and perhaps offers some consolation when other pleasures, such as family get-togethers, are denied. For those, like me, who have no pretence to green-fingers, there is still a sense of modest achievement as parts of the garden begin to look slightly more presentable. In truth, gardening and gardens make most of us feel better, whether crawling on our knees with a trowel or sitting on a bench in quiet contemplation. And so, to the next piece.....

A message from Shetland



The Revd Jeremy Dare was the superintendent minister in Shetland and Chair of District for 12 years until his retirement in 2015: he and Sheila, his wife, now live in the hamlet of Ulsta on the island of Yell. Jeremy preached at Norley in June 2015 en route to the Methodist Conference at Southport – hence his message's greeting.

Photo of Ulsta, taken from the ferry which links Yell with Mainland (Shetland), May 2019.

Jeremy picks up Bishop Robert Solomon's theme from last week, from another perspective, as does his prayer at the end.

Dear Friends,

We have been blessed by reading your reflections, and at the suggestion of John, offer a few words from Yell, the island we live on which is part of Shetland.

A few years ago, we cut the turf from a section of our garden which was simply moorland. Digging and rotavating the peat, adding a lot of sand and a thick layer of seaweed [which is readily available there], gave us a reasonable vegetable plot. With enthusiasm, seed potatoes and onion sets were planted and grew well. However, our old rusty stock fence was weakened by sheep itching themselves until they found a way through and flattened the onions. It was a year of many rabbits too and they dug up a lot of the potatoes and took a few bites, leaving them all over the place! Needless to say, we left the plot fallow for a few years until we had the fence replaced and the rabbit numbers had reduced.

During this present strange time, we decided to rediscover the plot and have been slowly digging our way across it. As I wrestled with some of the more vigorous weeds and shook soil from the matted grass to reveal useful ground again, I thought about how much easier it would have been to have kept on top of it over the last few years! So too my life. Have I let neglect lead to much more effort to return to where I was some time ago in my Christian walk? The Lord is very gracious and forgiving, but some weeds are very much at home and reluctant resign their vigour! This time of resurrection, as Ascension Day approaches, is full of hope and promise. God in Jesus holding out to us the prospect of renewal and fresh vistas. His weeding in our hearts can only be good thing. Imagine what He would sow there too! Sheila and I hope you are finding the stirring of grace enabling and strengthening you.

God bless you, Jeremy Dare

Gardens in poetry, hymns and scripture

Gardens and flowers have always been a rich vein for poets and hymnwriters. Think of some – go on, recite or sing them out loud, in the kitchen or front room or back garden. What springs to mind? Never mind that some may sound dated: they contain beauty, insight, memory, truth and a sense of God's creation and purpose.

My earliest memories are of A A Milne's 'The Dormouse and the Doctor' published in 'When we were very young' which began its fifteen rather repetitive verses with the immortal lines:

*There once was a Dormouse who lived in a bed of delphiniums (blue) and geraniums (red),
And all the day long he'd wonderful view of geraniums (red) and delphiniums (blue).*

From the age of four I have always known the colours of geraniums (red) and delphiniums (blue) in that order. At Sunday School, we sang Ella Armitage's 1884 hymn (Methodist MHB 843) 'In our dear Lord's garden' with its lines 'Christ the loving gardener tends these blossoms small; loves the little lilies as the cedars tall' and

‘Nothing is too lowly in His love to share’. The words may be Victorian but the theology of inclusiveness, much vaunted now, is surely sound.

Perhaps you have brought to mind William Wordsworth’s poem ‘Daffodils’ which were ‘beside the lake, beneath the trees, fluttering and dancing in the breeze’. Or Jimmie Rodgers’ popular song ‘English Country Garden’. Or Rudyard Kipling’s ‘The Glory of the Garden’ which ventures into the Garden of Eden in its last verse, beginning ‘Oh, Adam was a gardener...’ Which brings us neatly to biblical gardens.

Three stand out: the Garden of Eden, Gethsemane and the Resurrection Garden (belonging to Joseph of Arimathea), each a dramatic scene in its own way, but connected by the narrative of creation and human sin, the inescapable cross of Jesus and his triumph over sin and death, so that we may know forgiveness and life. Gardens, yes, but none were, in their moment of ultimate significance, admired for their beauty. Eden became synonymous with the fall of humankind; Gethsemane with the heart-wrenching struggle of Jesus to remain obedient (and being cruelly let down by his sleeping friends); and Joseph’s private garden, a provision for his own tomb, pressed into urgent service to lay the body of Jesus before the Sabbath began at sundown, and on the third day, to become the scene of the most extraordinary revelation in history to Mary, Peter and other disciples.

As we reflect on the biblical gardens of old, we rejoice in the glory of gardens as we see and enjoy them now. After references to some who pot begonias, some who bud a rose, some hardly fit to trust with anything that grows [that’s me], and half a proper gardener’s work is done upon his (or her) knees, Kipling reaches a crescendo in his poem’s eighth verse:

‘So when your work is finished, you can wash your hands and pray
For the Glory of the Garden, that it may not pass away’.

Amen to that. Enjoy the garden and may it be a blessing to you when so much else is forbidden.

And a final prayer

Almighty God, we thank you for being the gardener of our hearts. As we look around our world at many signs of beautiful growth, we pray that you would give us grace to open our secret gardens to you and encourage you to replace the unholy with your wonderful. We place this request in the name of Jesus Christ, our risen Lord.
Amen.

Photo in the National Orchid Garden, Singapore, March 2018.



Photos in this edition are all by Joan Bell: other than Jeremy Dare’s message and prayer, the words are by John Bell.

Note and invitation to readers

I have gathered these reflections and prayers and they include some of my own material. If you wish to offer pieces for inclusion in future weeks, please send them to me at johnabell@supanet.com Each edition will be released on a Friday so that it can be distributed for Sunday and the following week.

Many thanks, John