

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT YEAR A

Falling in a garden is one of the things we've all done. Very few of us will grow up without learning to walk confidently in a garden, and (inevitably) crashing onto a lawn. The poet Andrew Marvell is writing about the purity and innocence to be experienced in gardens, when he suddenly comes out with this verse:

What wondrous Life in this I lead!
Ripe Apples drop about my head;
The Luscious Clusters of the Vine
Upon my Mouth do crush their Wine;
The Nectaren, and curious Peach,
Into my hands themselves do reach;
Stumbling on Melons, as I pass,
Insnar'd with Flow'rs, I fall on Grass.

Which is not, I feel, particularly innocent. I would think of Marvell as very worldly-wise, and well aware that wherever there is a human being, there is a wholesale sensuality; and despite the literary convention shown in the book of Genesis, I believe this was no news to the God who made Adam and Eve, and set them in a garden to seek their way to life.

The idea of a garden as a living-space ordered to the human beings who make it is one of our oldest dreams. We often talk of the plan of God: another word for *plan* is *plot*: God is shown to us as a layer of plots; and we first find him in the moment where *The Lord God planted a garden in Eden, which is in the East*. Our faith has locked on to this truth; and as the beginning of our story is enshrined in a garden, so the plan of our re-creation calls back the memory.

Have you ever noticed how strangely the story of the Passion begins in a garden where there has been an agony, that is to say a mortal struggle? While the disciples sleep, our Saviour watches alone and lets the dread of death dawn on him. It is a dreamlike sequence under the ancient boughs of dark olive-trees, in a narrative of brutal deeds and wilful misunderstanding, human beings engineering death; and the plan of God subsumes this human iniquity as an indispensable element.

In a grotesque compact, we find Jesus insisting on the way of the Cross - in the teeth of his friends' insistence that it must not happen; they see their friendship in the defence of their Master; but deep in his own agony lies the knowledge that his very love for them demands he *must* drink the cup. This determination makes him one with Caiaphas, with Pilate, with the howling of the mob: and with Judas, the intimate friend who *turned*, in a chilling mirror-image of Christian conversion. It was always the plan of God that Jesus should make friends of his enemies. His agony in the garden takes much from the fact that those who will drive in the nails should be the ones accomplishing the Father's will.

The purposive mood in the first line of the Gospel should not be missed: The Spirit led Jesus into the desert *to be tempted by the devil*. We pray in the Lord's Prayer *lead us not into temptation*, more correctly *do not put us to the test*; the test is the ultimate confrontation with evil, and we have seen that where evil flexes its muscles, we have had it in our nature to cave in before it. The coming of the Son of God, in the same flesh which fell in the garden, will inaugurate a new humanity, whose divine nature will hold firm against dereliction.

The defeat of the devil is beyond our power, unless the grace of Christ spring within us. To recognise in his sharing of humanity the power which liberates us from falling, has been the

engine of Christian holiness through the Church's history. Lent is the time for us to recognise it in our own history. It must transform our life in all its dimensions.

So let the questions asked of Jesus in the desert, be asked of you.

- *What sustains you in the living of your life?*
Not only earthly bread, feeding the flesh, but the Word from God's mouth, by which you were made, and at which you will rise from the grave.
- *In what will you place your trust as you pass through the danger and risk of your existence?*
Not in anything you have made or tested, but in the trust you have in God, who is Lord of history and its terminus.
- *What will you call most precious, to what will you give your heart and your life?*
Not even the uttermost of earthly gifts, but the relationship you have with the one who called you into life.

If that relationship endures and deepens, by our fidelity to the path of Christ, the Father will bring us to another garden, where we shall find the wonder of our own opened tomb, and gravecloths discarded in an eternal morning, where the grief and pain of all the world's enslavement will finally be put to flight.