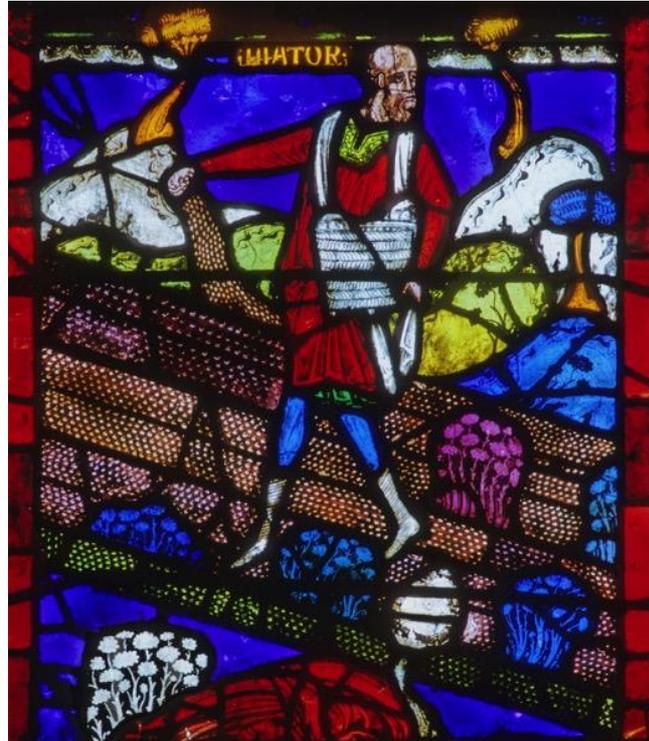


Pusey House
Sexagesima, 31 January, 2016
The Principal

Genesis 3.9-19, Psalm 83.1-2, 13-end, 2 Corinthians 11.19-31, Luke 8.4-15

The Fire of 1174

On the north ambulatory along the choir of Canterbury cathedral there is a wonderful representation in stained glass of the sower going forth to sow. The sower striding on the good soil is particularly profligate, casting more seed from his hand than any merely human sower could manage. The field is full of seeds and full of colour, a riot of blues, reds, greens and yellow contrast with the ruddy brown soil. The window was probably one of the first ones installed in the choir after the great fire of 1174.



One of the monks from Canterbury left a moving description which can help us to appreciate our readings:

On the 5th of Sept, in the year of grace 1174, about 9 o'clock, the wind blowing from the south with a fury almost beyond conception, a fire broke out.

Gervase then goes on to describe how the fire spread from houses next to the cathedral into the roof space of the chancel, hidden from sight, so that by the time people realized that the great cathedral was on fire, it was too late:

Thus the house of God, hitherto delightful like a paradise of pleasure, then lay contemptible in the ashes of the fire.¹

The Paradise of Pleasure and the Creeping Wisdom

Why does Gervase use the phrase 'a paradise of pleasure' to describe the cathedral? He appears to be evoking the Greek translation of Genesis which is the usual way the Old Testament is quoted by the New Testament. The Septuagint describes Eden as a "paradise of pleasure"² a "garden of delight"³ as well as "And the Lord God planted a paradise of

¹ murder of Thomas a becket 1170

² Augustine, *Ancient Christian Commentary*, Vol 1, Genesis, 54.

³ Brenton, LXX, Gen 3.23

pleasure in the east”. The Paradise of Eden which is the scene of the lesson from Genesis today was a place of fertility and harmony, where humanity dwelt in peace with nature and ‘walked with God’. Before choosing to know evil from the inside, the newly created humanity in Adam named the beasts: ‘He was capable of knowing God’s knowing of the things he has made’.⁴ We meet Adam and Eve in the lesson today after they have been beguiled, tricked into turning against the ground of their being and the secure prosperity of the garden. From that time forward they will in some way be limited or confounded by what John Donne calls ‘a creeping wisdom’, a wisdom that ‘looks downward’, covered in dust.⁵ The lesson serves as the back story which emphasizes the challenges faced by the sower:

‘The ground is cursed. Adam, who at once signifies our humanity collectively and as an individual, is told “*cursed is the ground because of you, in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life.*” The ground is cursed because Adam and Eve succumbed to the beguiling wisdom of the serpent and thus lost the ground of their standing with God. The ground of creation becomes the place of alienation from God.’⁶

The character of this alienation is evoked in another window in Canterbury cathedral, in one of the early ancestor windows usually called ‘Adam delving’. Adam is shown wearing an animal skin wrapped around his waist, a picture of mortality and thus, for the early interpreters of the Bible, a primeval prophesy concerning both the sacrificial system and its end and summation, the true Passover. Adam is delving, digging in the earth; but it is not the good, toil-free earth of paradise. Rather, it is earth mixed with stone. It is a picture we recognize, a picture of the struggle which attends our labours in whatever form they take, of inevitable frustration, and a picture of the hope of getting what we need to live well. St Augustine’s words still have a haunting quality: ‘I sank away from Thee, and I wandered, O my God, too much astray from Thee my stay, in these days of my youth, and I became to myself a barren land.’⁷ I became to myself a barren land.



Nonetheless, this is a barren land of promise, a garden in expectation. The skin wrapped around Adam in the Canterbury window points to St Paul’s proclamation of hope in the midst of struggle: who shall deliver me from the body of this death? Who shall save me from the struggle I feel and know, the perverse inclination to chose and embrace they very thing that diminishes life? *I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord*, the sower of the new paradise.

⁴ The Revd David Curry, Sexagesima Sermon (23 Feb, 2003), <http://www.lectionarycentral.com/sexag/Curry.html>.

⁵ John Donne, SERMON CXXVIII, *An Anniversary Sermon, Preached At St. Dunstan's, Upon The Commemoration Of A Parishioner, A Benefactor to that Parish*, Genesis iii. 24. , And dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life.

⁶ Curry.

⁷ *Confessions*, II, X, 18.

The Church as the Paradise of Pleasure

For Gervase, the monk who saw Canterbury burn, the Church was a ‘paradise of pleasure’. He was probably speaking of the material beauty of the great east arm of the cathedral that had been completed only fifty years earlier under the watchful eye of the Prior Conrad. Gervase’s description also evokes the idea that Christ the sower plants a new paradise around the tree of life which is his cross, watered by the water and blood which still flows from His side. For the second century Bishop of Lyons, St Irenaus, taught by the disciple of St John the evangelist, ‘The Church is planted as a paradise in this world’. In the *Epistle to Diognetus*, perhaps one of the earliest defenses of the Christian faith (app. AD 130), those who love God rightly are described as having been made ‘a paradise of delight’.⁸ This is a condensed expression of the longer description which St Paul offers: ‘*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law*’. These are the fruit which the Word brings forth in the soil of our lives; these are the seeds which he plants and waters in the soil of the new garden.



From the earliest ages of the Church the work of Christ has been understood as a return to Paradise. This is evoked artistically when Ecclesia, a picture of the New Eve, collects the blood which flows from the side of Christ in a chalice. And the same angel who drove Adam and Eve from paradise with a flaming sword now stands by the cross sheathing it. This is an image in which we are invited to live again this morning, coming to feed on the sacrament; coming to drink from the sacramental streams which the Sower

pours out in order to water the parched soil of our souls; coming in thanks that the sword has been put away, that God’s love is no longer experienced by us as a burning fire, but rather as an embrace of mercy refreshing as the springs in the desert.

This understanding of the Church as a ‘paradise of pleasure’ is often embodied in the architecture of the building. One early father, St Basil, says that ‘few know’ that ‘we all look to the east in our prayers’, that we face the altar together because we “are seeking the ancient Fatherland which God planted in Eden toward the east.”⁹ Here at Pusey House this is expressed in the East Window where Christ is Ascended above the altar, not alone, but with His mother, the New Eve, an image of the Church, and knit together with the saints of the Old and the new covenant. What knits them together is a wonderful yellow vine, the true vine into which we are knit and which is the vineyard at the heart of the paradise of pleasure which Christ sows and nourishes. When we come today to receive

⁸ 3. *Epistle to Diognetus*, XII, 1; cf. Willians, op. cit., p. 31, for this and the Irenaeus, see Crouse, *Images of Pilgrimage*.

⁹ Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, 27.66, in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, Vol 1, 54.

the sacrament today, we are invited to leave behind the ‘creeping wisdom’ of the cursed ground which looks downward, that we might look upward to the crucified wisdom of the Sower of the seed: *If I must needs glory, I will glory of the things which concern mine infirmities.*

The Parable of the Sower

In the Gospel of St Luke we are given not only the parable of the sower and a description of the different types of ground, we are given also the interpretation. The seed is the word of God. God ‘who is already everywhere, yet unconfined in space’ came to us in the garment of our flesh.¹⁰ The Word of God comes and casts Himself down to the ground. A keen farmer in the tough conditions of first-century Palestine might pour out his seed generously to make sure that every inch of good ground was covered. But we would blame the farmer for doing what the sower does in the Gospel. The seed is cast everywhere. Not just on the good soil, but on the path beaten hard by activity which expresses the creeping wisdom of the cursed ground. It is cast on shallow soil and among thorns. For a farmer this is madness.

It is important to see that the parable is not simply a moral lesson of the sort that says, ‘you will only get out of life what you put in’. It is much more radical than that. By casting himself down in the cursed soil, soil concealing the stones of self-will, or choked with thorns of better offers, the Word seeks to turn ‘the cursed ground of [human disobedience into] the place of our participation in the life of God’. Father Mark reminded us last week that these weeks when we turn from Epiphany to Lent, from the manifestation of the Light to the pilgrimage to the cross, we are not just taking the next steps in a sequence. Again, we are seeking something much more radical: time is broken open, the soil is prepared that the Word may be sown in soil which has been made good. For ‘the point is rather that Christ’s Incarnation, Epiphany, Death, Resurrection, Ascension and the Outpouring of His Spirit, are the thing - the only thing - that changes us’, changes us ‘from water to wine, darkness to light, from soil to spiritthat once for all miracle which turns word into flesh - is what Lent [will teach] us to see, to enter, and to embody’.¹¹

St Paul and the Creeping Wisdom

The epistle from St Paul is powerful and puzzling. Sometimes the epistle seems to illuminate the Gospel in a straight-forward way. Today, it seems a bit more like a pick breaking up the soil, illuminating by first making sparks. These verses come from part of St Paul’s argument with some in the new Church in Corinth who he thinks have been bewitched by ‘super-apostles’ who are in fact no apostles at all. His criticism is particularly strong. These false-leaders who demand obedience and allegiance are not enlivened by the love of Christ. What does that love look like? St Paul describes the love which casts itself down on all sorts of soil, confident not in any human effort, but in the grace which is able to break up the stones and to make what was cursed or choked into fertile soil. Whereas St Paul has been ‘*in journeyings often; in perils of waters; in perils of robbers; in perils by mine own countrymen; in perils by the [Gentiles] in weariness and painfulness*’, these super apostles lord it over the new church in Corinth. St Paul is shocked by their complacency. ‘*If a man bring you into bondage, if a man devour you, if a man take of you, if a man exalt himself, if a man smite you on the face*’. This is not the patience which brings forth good fruit, which turns un-love into

¹⁰ Chrysostom, Hom 45 in Matt, in Toal, vol 1, 388 (Catena Aurea)

¹¹ M Stafford, Septuagesima, 2016

love. This is again the creeping wisdom of the world which looks downward and becomes blinded by dust and its various shades.

St Paul's description of the false apostles in Corinth seems to be a kind of commentary on the soil which is not ready to receive the Word or to bring it to perfection. What is particularly powerful about the description is that it describes the kind of beguiling wisdom of the serpent; again, the creeping wisdom. It is a kind of wisdom which seems to offer power, to be enlightened and strong, but is really a kind of bondage. Why do the Corinthians allow themselves to be abused and belittled? Why do we allow ourselves to be beguiled or abused by false promises, kept away from the light which turns the cursed ground into the ground of blessing? St Paul is describing a kind of following or teaching Christ which puts stones in the good soil. What does this false leadership look like in our day? The sneering approach which does not allow us to speak honestly, either about both our struggles or the hope which is in us, which does not promise mercy but trades on power, which has little place for joy, for finding a place of refreshment in the paradise of pleasure, these are all different kinds of soil which need to be broken up by the Sower of the seed.

The Seed and Fruit of the Paradise of Pleasure

There is an element of burden in the Gospel proclamation. The Sower sows the seed of God's word. The sower prepares the soil, but this preparation of the soil will not happen against us. The message which describes different soils may describe different people, but the different soils are also pictures of our heart, the soil of our lives, at different times. One of the surprising aspects of the parable is that it does not seem to be addressed to outsiders, to 'those who openly repulse God's word. [Rather] it is concerned only with those who seem to be teachable'¹². This might jar us into hearing and pondering, teaching us to beware of the kind of enthusiasm which has little place for patient abiding, or to see how both some kinds of anxieties and indulgences can choke the plant and the fruit which it bears.

The message here is not that we must damp down Life and put a lid on all kinds of pleasure, making our lives more drab or grey. Rather, it is a question of developing the capacity to taste new things, to enjoy brighter colours, to delight in fruits which belong to the paradise of pleasure, the garden of delight.

When St Paul speaks of glorying in his weakness, he is describing a kind of life which is able to enjoy the fruits of this garden even while giving himself to the work with which he is entrusted.

The point of his account is not a glorying in suffering. Remember, St Paul chides the Corinthians for allowing the false or 'super' apostles to abuse them. Rather, in Augustine's terms, for St Paul his love is his weight.¹³ He is moved by love, and this love brings him into conflict with all that opposes the love of Christ. And yet he, despite these trials, still enjoys the fruit of the paradise of pleasure, the new Eden. The Tree of Life at

¹² Bruner, Matt vol 2, Calvin is quoted, p 18

¹³ 'My love is my weight (*Pondus meum amor meus*); whithersoever I am moved, I am moved there by love. By thy gift (*donum*, the Holy Spirit) we are set on fire, and are borne aloft; we burn, and we are on the way. We climb the ascents which are in the heart, and sing the "song of Degrees"^[16]. With thy fire, with thy good fire, we burn and go on, for we go up to the "peace of Jerusalem"; for I rejoiced in them who said to me, "we will go into the house of the Lord". There good will will place us, so that we shall wish nothing other than to remain there forever.^[17]

the centre of this garden is the cross of our Lord, and the first fruit of the tree is the wound-bearing yet glorified body of Christ. The cross is the new Tree of Life. Its logic, toil, and struggles draw St Paul - draw us - more deeply into the life of the vine. In St Paul, we see what it means that 'The cursed ground of our disobedience becomes the place of our participation in the life of God':

If I must needs glory, I will glory of the things which concern mine infirmities.

But that on the good ground are they which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience.