

ST JAMES' CHURCH, KING STREET, SYDNEY

**Sermon for Week of Prayer for Reconciliation**

**30 May 2021**

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*Rector of St James*

*'Dwellers all in Time and Space'*

**Readings:** Micah 6: 6-8; Romans 8: 1-11.

**Images of the Garden**

The image of the garden is an enduring one in the human psyche. In our imaginings we can think of gardens as special places that take on many forms; from the formal gardens of Versailles to the English park style of Capability Brown, or the secret gardens of the Alhambra Palace in Spain, the desert gardens of Alice Springs, and the wild gardens of Arcadia National Park in the USA; and then there are kitchen gardens, market gardens, and water gardens.

When I have the opportunity, I enjoy walking around the nearby Royal Botanical Gardens, which provides access to the beauty of the harbour, fresh air, and the joy of seeing people relaxing in the outdoors. In history, literature, and art, gardens have been represented as places of quietness, retreat, safety, abundance, healing, education, prayer, and relaxation.

The Judeo-Christian narrative begins with the story of a garden in which the representative humans, Adam and Eve, were created and assigned by God to be gardeners or stewards. In a place called Eden the woman and the man were meant to live in harmony with each other, nature, and God.

This was God's desire, but the story goes on to describe the breakdown in this three-way set of relationships. The result was that the man and woman were cast out of the Garden into a world of shame, difficulty, and death. What follows in the Bible is the story of the people of God as they address the dilemmas of sin, identity, salvation, and death.

The story culminates with the coming of Jesus the Messiah who reverses the effects of human sin and brokenness and reopens the gate to the Garden so that people may re-enter it. The Garden is now called the Kingdom of God, but it continues to be a matter of living in the peaceful presence of God.

## **Created in the Image of God**

An aspect of the Genesis narrative is the idea of human beings created in the likeness of God – it is known in theological terms as the *Imago Dei*. Within humanity, therefore, we can discover something of God's nature that was put there in the creative process.

This understanding of God's presence in humanity found its fullness in the person of Jesus, who was both God and human at the same time. St Paul describes Jesus as the second Adam who revealed the desired nature of the first Adam. Through the death of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection we are brought back to a moment where the effects of Adam and Eve's disobedience of God is reversed.

The result is that instead of death we are offered life; instead of struggle we are offered freedom; instead of fear we are offered love; instead of rejection we are offered welcome and hospitality. Reconciliation with God involves recognition of these dynamics and are a template for our reconciliation with others.

Another aspect of being aware of God's presence is that we can recognise the existence of God's Spirit in others – that is, in all people, not only those we like or of whom we approve. When we recognise the presence of the Spirit in others we are challenged to treat them with respect – as if each other person were Jesus himself. It is a radical idea, but it is one that leads to a desire for justice and fairness.

## **Stewards of Creation**

A recurring theme in the creation stories of Genesis concerns the 'goodness of creation'. From its earliest times, the church struggled to come to terms with this concept. The Greek philosophy of the day taught that the physical world was fallen and evil while the spiritual world was understood to be something 'separate' from and 'above' human existence. Unsurprisingly, it influenced the early church leaders.

These attitudes came to influence the interpretation of the creation stories. In some minds, the 'fall' and 'curse' of Adam and Eve resulted in a permanent separation between God, humanity, and the world. This led to people losing sight of the goodness of creation and the intention that human beings were meant to work with God in caring for it. The 'world' was therefore understood to be hostile to humanity.

Likewise, another and later view developed from the first creation story based on the idea that God gave 'dominion' to human beings over creation (Genesis 1:26). Some modern thinkers suggested that where God gave 'dominion' it actually meant 'domination' and 'exploitation'. However, such a view seems incompatible with the Bible.

Theologian Matthew Fox has called for a return to a more radical interpretation of the creation stories, which helps us to understand that creation was made to be good, and that humans were meant to work with God's creative processes in the world. This means that humanity is neither to be disconnected from creation nor to dominate it – an idea often expressed today through the concept of 'sustainability'.

Fox argues that as nature was created to be 'good' and as human beings were created to be both part of nature as well as 'in the image of God', then we have a responsibility to be 'co-creators' with God. Creation, he argues, is an expression of God's glory, and we are called to work with God to ensure that the creation flourishes both in our generation and in the generations to come.

This does not diminish recognition that humans are disobedient to God and that there are consequences for this sin. Yet, the redemption that has come in Christ demonstrates that things can be made right and hence the effect of the fall of the first Adam is reversed by the effect of resurrection of the last Adam. Human beings therefore need not continue to live in brokenness but rather, through reconciliation with God, return to their intended purpose as stewards of the garden.

### **Redeeming the Time**

This all brings me to the overwhelming question of justice and our purpose in the world; as the Prophet Micah wrote:

*"He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"*  
(Micah 6: 8)

Justice is love expressed in corporate terms. It is not so much about how things are, but about how they should be. In this respect, justice is a dynamic thing that brings about a transformation focussed on fixing what has been broken.

In a supreme act of irony, therefore, the death and resurrection of Jesus brought justice to humanity by redeeming human brokenness and restoring it to what God intended – which is to live at peace with God, each other, and with nature.

Moreover, we who are followers of Jesus are called to do likewise. For salvation is also an expression of justice, healing is about bringing about recovery of goodness, restoration is about returning that which was lost or taken, and forgiveness is about seeking what is good for another person and society in general.

Between Sorry Day (last Wednesday) and Mabo Day (next Thursday) we live in a moment of time to remember, reflect, pray, and act for reconciliation with the indigenous peoples of our country.

In 2012, historian Bill Gammage wrote a book entitled the *The Biggest Estate on Earth* about how Aborigines made created the Australian landscape through their land management practices. Europeans recognised their stewardship through the park-like nature of the environment that they encountered, which supplied ample plants and animals for hunting, and had the added effect of mitigating damage from bushfires and floods.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were stewards of the Garden of Australia, put here by God to tend it. They, like Adam, understood themselves as being formed of the dust of the earth and belonging to it. And likewise, the Aboriginal people (like all humanity) were created in the image of God and the Spirit of God dwelt in them.

We understand these things now, but it was not always so. There was a time when the humanity of indigenous people was not recognised by the later-comers to Australia. Moreover, their bonds to the land and custodianship of it were ignored, and they were not accorded citizenship or equality under the law. Atrocities were committed upon them, their land taken, and their spiritual bonds with their country crushed. The scars of mistreatment, marginalisation, dispossession, poverty, and powerlessness over the past 233 years has taken a great toll.

As Christians, we are called to redeem the time and seek justice. It is a justice that has little to do with black-letter law and everything to do with the Christian message of healing, restoration, forgiveness, and salvation. It is done so that we may be a blessing to others, and it begins with reconciliation.

In the Uluru Statement from the Heart, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have invited us to walk with them in a movement of the Australian people for a better future; and we should walk with them, as all God's children together dwelling in God's Garden together.