

Gardens, gardens. A comfort and obsession in the long years of retirement, a pain in the back of the house in earlier years. Gardens; never dull, always changing, even if you have them completely concreted over- I can dream can't I?- they never stop changing, with the seasons, with the weather, overnight and day by day.

Part of the ceaseless restless fluidity of the horticultural landscape is that no matter how primly you manicure, you really can't control it: things turn up in gardens. They appear, apparently out of nowhere. Odd things. Things that give you pause, make you think, occasionally, make you doubt your sanity, make you think that perhaps you're not being paranoid and they are actually out to get you (which indeed they are, but don't tell them I told you- I'll deny everything). It might be random, it might be deliberate, borne by the wind or deposited by your neighbours in the dark of night; No matter where that garden is, there's always something unexpected turns up. It could be pleasant and pleasing: it usually isn't but even I have to admit there is a slim possibility it could be. The mirabelle plum tree that planted itself in Barkingside scrub one year and fruited the next; the spring surprise of a host of golden daffodils that a previous occupant planted not, for once, in the middle of the lawn. I'm sure Paul McCartney was delighted when the seeds a fan sent him unexpectedly turned into marijuana when he planted them on his Scottish farm; probably less happy when the police seemed unconvinced by his explanation. Sometimes, sometimes, the things that turn up unplanned in your very own patch of green cannot but charm. Bear them in mind, because they are largely the exception.

Most often what turns up in your garden is less welcome. Round the front, abutting a main road the unplanned was mostly-emptied cans of Special Brew and partly eaten kebabs- the usual detritus of drunk people walking home after the pub. Nothing surprising there. A Barkingside back garden can be an odder proposition. Start with tin foil. Then a used nappy, followed by a sinister crushed doll's torso, head and limbless. It peaked when half a rotting crow corpse appeared in the middle of the lawn. You may think that is bad enough. But no. Because when I buried it in the compost heap, it reappeared the very next morning in exactly the same place. It might I suppose have been the other half of the bird: I didn't check the compost. Still. Half a decomposed crow. How did that get there? Was it deliberate? Did one of my sermons offend someone with mafia connexions? Nothing more sinister than foxes of course, who were also responsible for Beddington's how did that get in the garden prizewinner- a fat Jack Russell, stuck down a hole under the park-screening hedge. I assume Daphne (such was its name) had been following the fox rather than

being pushed down there, but you never know, your average fox is a lot more cunning - and motivated- than your typical terrier.

Sometimes what turns up in your garden is bad. Worse than dissected carrion. Really bad. Like when your neighbour's tree unexpectedly turns up in your garden on top of your van. Really bad: ask my neighbours.

So gardens. A comfort and obsession in the long years of retirement, a pain and a drag in the earlier years. And never less than barely tamed nature, forever throwing up something unplanned, regular as clockwork provoking the question 'How did that get there?'

This is not something unique to suburbia or parsonage gardens; it is intrinsic to the garden experience and it matters to us because when God had the lightbulb 'let's make humankind in our own image' moment, what he went on to make was someone to look after his garden. And gardens are never fully under control. The unexpected turns up. Maybe the first sentence Adam said was 'How did that get there?'. If it wasn't his maiden speech it was almost certainly one repeated use must have made him learn by heart.

So the unexpected in the garden. For Adam and Eve and their descendants- us- here is the question.

How did that get there? How did the serpent get into the garden? What was the snake doing in Eden? Why did God allow evil into paradise?

That escalated quickly didn't it? From cosy tales of suburban green to the thorniest of theological problems before you can say Justin Welby. From Eden to evil in less time than it takes you to say 'I was enjoying that nap: is he still preaching?'

How did that get there? How did that get in the garden? What was the snake doing in Eden?

This is not a practical question. The answer is not 'through a gap in the fence' or 'on the bottom of someone's shoe'. This is not a practical question because the tale of the temptation in Eden is not a real world story (clue: there's a talking snake in it). The questions it raises do not emerge from hands-on problems which will yield to pragmatic solutions. It's Eden: we're in the realm of archetype, allegory and avatar;

myth, metaphor and make-believe. Would you Adam and Eve it? The only permissible answer is 'no' if you think the question assumes actual historical people and real life events. This doesn't mean that any lessons we take will be worthless. Quite the opposite. Fables and parables are morality on steroids, truth is more than fact, and the Genesis stories give us deep, deep truth.

So. Back to that inconvenient question. No kicking stuff into the long grass in *this* church. What was the serpent doing in Eden?

In our Genesis allegory, the serpent is the human propensity for evil and as long as there are humans in the garden, the snake will be there too. We should not be surprised when it turns up in Eden, we really shouldn't need to ask 'How did that get there?' Wherever we are, here or there, then or now, there the snake is; shadowing our every move, tracking our steps, dogging our heels, always by our side. Once we're out of Eden, we meet the serpent again and again. Later on in the tale, it has grown up into a more sophisticated personification: Satan. Fresh from the egg the serpent tempted with greed and reason; now he has learned to quote Scripture. We are our own worst enemies, and the serpent knows it. The easiest way to trap us is with our own best intentions, the easiest way to tempt us into sin is to convince us we are doing the right thing. Good people can do bad things, killing with kindness, intending to do right. The road to hell, paved with good intentions, is walked in imperceptible steps, and all the signposts tell us we are going the other way. So what better way to tempt the religious heart than with twisted scripture? (BTW Never trade Bible verses with the devil. He's good and you won't win. Jesus did. You won't. Tempted but without sin, Jesus had the advantage none of us ever will).

So. That snake is wherever we are. It's inevitable. We are not perfect, we are not God. We build flawed worlds, we live in flawed worlds somebody else has built. While we're doing our best to do good, while we are, on the whole, a pretty good lot, we almost without thinking, without noticing, acquiesce in its evil. It's structural. We really can't help it. Until we learn to change it.

We live in a flawed world that countless generations of flawed humans have planted and unless we change that world from the roots up, with the very best of intentions, good people will continue to do bad things. The cards are rigged against us. It makes no difference how round your marble if the playground is uneven and pitted. It doesn't matter how good you are at riding a bicycle if the road is all bumps and

potholes. It matters not how well laundered your clothes are, they will soon be dirty if everywhere you go is lathered with soot and mud.

So, to change ourselves, to truly be the good we are called to be— the salt of the world, the light of the world, the leaven in the dough, the city built on the hill top— we must first change the world. Our individual piety is not enough; our personal relationship is not enough. If we never do anything deliberately wrong, if we are never personally unjust or cruel or unkind, we will yet never be blameless. We will be as guilty as if we were doing it if we are content to allow injustice, cruelty and prejudice, poverty, inequality and racism to be built into our world. As Christians, we can never be bystanders; we are either for the Kingdom of God or against it. Neutrality is not an option.

The serpent, the human propensity to evil, is always with us. Its voice will ever whisper in our ears. Eat the fruit. Turn the stones into bread. Thirty pieces of silver, a good price. Worship me. Ever in our ears. But we can listen less. Learn to tune it out. The more we listen to the voice of Jesus, the less we will hear that snake.

The serpent is always with us. It won't go away. It's built into the bricks of the world we live in. But what we have built isn't built to last. Cowboy builders built all cultures. No edifice is for ever. Walls do come tumbling down. The world can be changed for the better, and we cannot be followers of Christ if we do not try to change it.