

Although there is much about life after ordination that one can anticipate and theological colleges do their best to prepare you for, inevitably there is only so much time and only so much money available for your training, so there are always many things waiting to throw the unknowing when they first don that white collar. Being asked to say grace, being asked to bless a variety of apparently random and curious objects, being mistaken for Derek Nimmo or Dawn French, or, if the person has a particularly worrying look in their eye, the actor from the *Thornbirds* or the priest from *Fleabag*. A bit of forethought could lead someone to put these things on the syllabus at Church House, but, why change the institutional habit of a lifetime, and in retrospect what would really have been helpful would have been some instruction in horticulture. Probably an instruction like 'avoid it at all costs', but I guess they're never going to tell you that are they?

Before that collar tightened round my neck I had almost no hands-on experience of gardening. One soon-neglected window box, several quickly dispatched houseplants and my parents' entirely inexplicable avid listening to the the radio programme *Gardeners Question Time* was about it. Thus when I landed in my first curate's house I was quite happy to believe that gardening, as its aficionados will tell you, is a supreme relaxation, a form of deep mediation on nature, a contemplation of the good earth and all it can give, an initiation into some arcane but ultimately timeless mysteries. Countless chunks of ageless wisdom clearly centre around gardens, from the parables of Jesus to the *Arabian Nights*. *St Benedict's Rule* encourages his monks to spend a good deal of their time doing backbreaking work in the garden, so, I assumed, it must be good for the soul too. All in all, young and innocent as I was, you can imagine, quite looking forward to having a garden.

My experience of gardening in the ensuing 19 years has, been anything but relaxing, contemplative or mystical. It has been characterised less by an experience of communing with nature than battling with it. Gardening, is not relaxation it is warfare. To endeavour to tame the wilderness is to start hostilities. Sow seeds and prepare for a siege; start messing with your borders and battle is joined. Weeds invade, squirrels perform blitzkrieg on anything in a pot, small and unmentionable arthropods annex large swathes of territory for their nefarious purposes, wasps are battle-hardened sappers, ants experts in chemical warfare. Nature abhors a vacuum, and she's not very keen on gardeners either. After nineteen years say 'garden' and I'll say 'concrete it over'. Luckily I don't own the said gardens.

If I have been led to contemplate the mysteries of creation by the patches of green out the back and front of a succession of clergy houses then there is one question which has emerged from my experience, one, I think, rather simple question, and it is this. What, just what, is the purpose of a slug? That and why oh why do people think it's a good idea to plant deciduous trees in Rectory gardens? But mostly, what's the slug thing about?

Slugs. No doubt one of the creatures brought to Adam for that marathon naming session you will find in Genesis chapter 2 was the slug. Probably it was not the first animal to receive its moniker- though you never know. No doubt as our distant ancestor looked at this small, featureless, drab and unappealing creature he gave it a name to match. Adam looked at the diminutive gastropod and from that moment on it was "slug". If Adam had realised at the time what this creature was actually capable of, had he known the destruction that could be wrought on a patch of prized marigolds by the animal that looked like nothing other than animated cat dung, he might have given it a much longer name that resembled a string of invective in, say, Aramaic or possibly Cantonese which seem, to me, the two best languages for swearing in.

There were almost certainly slugs in the Garden of Eden which may seem somewhat anomalous: what rôle, one may ask, the slug in Shangri-La? Well this was paradise so the slugs of Eden almost certainly performed a highly commendable task like eating weeds or mowing the lawn or gently guiding the bishop to another house. There was another creature, a slightly bigger and supposedly more intelligent one, which took upon itself the task of eating the things the gardener didn't want eaten.

So, what, just what is the purpose of a slug? There is, I hazard to suggest, an easy answer to that question, one not readily obvious from hours spent in a garden, but one with the unassailable merit of Scriptural backing. The purpose of a slug is to praise God. The purpose of all creation is to praise God, and by and large this teeming, digging, eating, growing, go-forth-and-multiplying lot succeed. How? By doing what they do and being as they were created. Each wood is a cathedral of nature. Each nibble of grass a daily office, each passing immobile geological year a vigil, the slop of melting snow turned to slush an intricate anthem in praise of its creator, the angry froth and roar of the sea a fiery sermon preached to the glory of God, the hungry slug devouring all in its path a saint on its knees, or in this case its stomach-foot. Nature cannot be distracted from her ceaseless psalmody. Animals, birds, fish, plants, rocks,

streams, rivers, the mighty sea do not have idols; indeed cannot have idols: they can only sing an endless song of praise.

And so if we turn our gaze from the named to the namer we can ask the same question of Adam. What is the purpose of a human? It is sometimes supposed that the purpose God created man for was to be the Gardener of Eden, but as there was a man before there was a garden this seems unlikely. In fact, gardening as we know it didn't seem to start until after the Fall. Only when humanity had sinned did gardening become backbreaking labour and a hard-fought battle. Perhaps that was when slugs stopped cutting the grass and started eating the lettuce.

So no, we can conclude, to my personal relief, that the purpose of humankind is not to be gardeners. In fact, our purpose is distinctly slug-shaped. Humanity is created to worship God.

Of late, the Church of England, at least as far as slogans and strap-lines go, have become somewhat unlikely eco-warriors. Saving the planet has joined saving souls as one of our marks of mission. There are many of the dedicated in our ranks, and probably some more cynical higher up the hierarchy who see a bandwagon and know when to jump. But Christian concern for the environment is neither adopting the concerns of the world nor desperately trying to stop congregation decline by getting down with the kids. If nobody else cared for the natural world we would have to. Because when we worship, we join with all creation in its song of praise. We must never prevent the rest of creation from adding their voices to that worship. They, like we, were created to praise God.

Now the similarity with slugs, and indeed with all the rest of creation, ends there because, unique among all creation, we cannot just 'be as nature created'. Despite the best efforts of naturalists and anthropologists, we have no idea what man 'in the wild' is, we cannot go and look at a pristine pride of humans unspoiled by progress, because such a thing has and can never exist. We are not creatures of instinct blindly ruled by our biology, though of course we are certainly restricted by it and the borders of our earthly lives are determined by it. We are more. We are social and linguistic creatures. We live in constant cultural flux, and in a very real sense we create our own nature. But most distinctly, we are creatures born to transcend.

If we want to know the purpose of something, perhaps it is not the beginning we should be looking at, not some sort of primal state of imagined innocence, but the end. We make the mistake of thinking that Creation was an event that happened

back then in the mists of time, over and done with, done and dusted like the Battle of Hastings or the Magna Carta. But it is not. Creation has a direction, a purpose, it is an ongoing project moving towards its goal. Now when a slug slithers off its slimy mortal coil, its job is done, the purpose for which it was created is fulfilled, it has praised God in its own idiosyncratic way and that, is that.

But for you or I our purpose stretches beyond our earthly life, our destination is the eternal vision of God, to share, with the Elders and the living creatures of John's vision in the book of Revelation, in the endless, indescribable worship of heaven.

There is always the risk that it may not go to plan: the little blue pellets strewn throughout our lives may, in the end prove too enticing, too tempting and like slug pellets, all too deadly. But let us not turn aside, let us persist along the narrow path. Let us not think that if we have food and clothing and material wealth and contentment, a successful career, a sense of achievement in life, a wealth or experience, a beautiful, loving partner and successful children and even the many grandchildren; let us not think that if we have those, that we have reached our destination. We were created to see God face to face; we should be satisfied with nothing less.