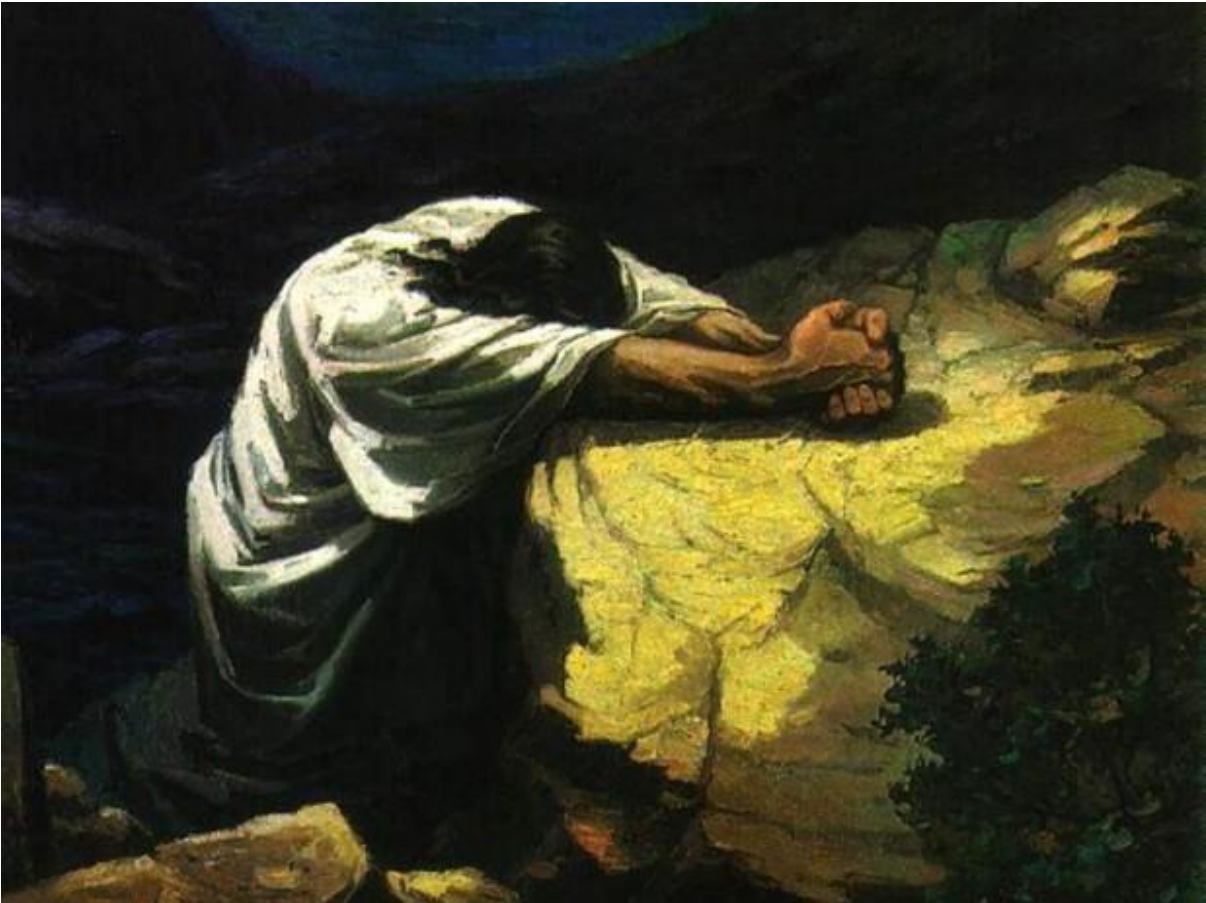


Good Friday 2021
St Swithin's, Walcot



A Garden of Tears

Welcome to our Good Friday Reflective service at the Cross.

As we gather in church or at home, we remember the events of two thousand years ago on that first Good Friday as Jesus made his way to the cross amidst the shouts and jeers, the tears and sadness. This year of all years as we reflect back on what must surely have been one of the most surreal years most of us will have known, there will almost certainly have been a large number of tears shed by so many of us. As we accompany Jesus today, we know that we are not (and were not) on our own when our own tears were shed. The Message version of Psalm 56: 8 reads:

***“You’ve kept track of my every toss and turn
through the sleepless nights,
Each tear entered in your ledger,
each ache written in your book”.***

This year we’ve taken the theme of ‘Gardens’ as our inspiration for our Good Friday service. Perhaps at first an unusual topic for Good Friday but as we’ve explored, prayed and written we hope the following reflections help you make your own journeys through the various gardens towards the cross and the hope and reality of the risen Lord Jesus as we look towards Easter Sunday

Please feel free as you journey through this service to use the accompanying Order of Service leaflet where you will find prayers for the end of each reflection plus words of hymns and songs which will narrate the Good Friday and Easter story.

May you experience once again the horror and terror of that first Good Friday as you read and reflect but our prayer is that you remain sure in the knowledge that this is not the end of the story. Easter Sunday is coming as is surely the end of this pandemic!

The Garden of Eden

We are starting our Good Friday reflections in a garden that transcends time and space. It is a garden that is filled with the presence of its creator. There is a peaceful harmony in the relationship between the garden, its creator, and those placed in the garden to tend and nurture it. This is the Biblical Garden of Eden, and it roots us in the place God intended for us to dwell and flourish.

Over the last twelve months, as our normal lives have been turned upside down by the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic, so many of us have found comfort, renewal, and freedom from being in gardens and parks or perhaps just looking out of our windows at the created world. It does seem that we have an innate longing in our hearts to return to that first garden and rediscover the peaceful interconnectedness of all life.

In the account of creation in Genesis 2, we see that this connection between God, humanity and the earth is made explicit as Adam is formed by God out of the *adamah*, the Hebrew word for earth or ground. Adam and Eve are placed in the Garden of Eden not just to lie around and enjoy the view but to work the soil and tend the garden; to grow and nurture the trees, plants, and animals.

God's perfect plan is to see the people of God; in the sanctuary of God, dwelling in the presence of God. However, as we see further on in the Genesis account, this depends on the choice that God's people make. Humanity must willingly submit to God's plan, and they are completely free to reject God's plan. Adam and Eve choose to ignore God's guidance and decide to eat from the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil. Consequently, they are expelled from the garden, and God places guardians at the gate to prevent them from returning.

You could view the rest of the Bible as a story of redemption that will ultimately enable humanity to return to the garden. The Bible is bookended by gardens beginning with the Garden of Eden in Genesis and ending with the glorious Garden City in Revelation. The whole Bible is a story of salvation, from creation to fall, and then to redemption, and ultimately restoration. Perhaps there is a greater ending than just restoration; this picture in Revelation is a consummation of all God's plans. In the Garden City in Revelation, we see the creation of a home that surpasses the Garden of Eden. This new garden has a Lamb on the throne at its centre.

There is another garden on the journey from the Garden of Eden to the new garden in Revelation. This is the Garden of Gethsemane. Here, Jesus, perfectly human and perfectly God, makes the right choice. He pours out his heart to his Father and chooses to fully surrender to God's will. It is through his death and resurrection that he will redeem all who turn to him. As restored and forgiven children of God, we can again walk through the gates and return to the garden to dwell in the presence of God.

We are going to spend a couple of minutes in silence and give you time to reflect on our place in God's garden and our longing to return to dwell in his presence. I will close our time of silence with a short prayer.

- Perhaps you want to give thanks to God for gardens, parks and the created world that has refreshed, sustained, and renewed you over the last year?
- Do you need to say sorry for taking God's creation for granted, for not recognising the interdependence of all things in creation?
- Do you need the hope that all creation will be renewed and that those who trust in the death and resurrection of Jesus will walk in the new garden and dwell forever in the presence of God?



Gardens and Rivers

Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, “I am thirsty.” (John 19:28)

In the beginning there is a garden. We are told in Genesis that from it “A river flows out of Eden to water the garden and from there divides into four rivers.” (Genesis 2:10-14)

The first is named Pishon; it flows through Havilah. Pishon means increase or full flowing. God is not a God of scarcity and lack, but a God of abundance. Paul prayed (Ephesians 3:19) that believers would be filled with all the fullness of God, and John spoke of Jesus saying, “...out of His fullness (abundance) we have all received one grace after another and spiritual blessing upon spiritual blessing” (John 1:16, Amplified), and that in Jesus we have “life in all its fullness” (John 10:10). God doesn’t intend us to be drained, depleted, or deficient.

As Jesus hangs on a cross and thirsts we come to Him. Jesus the Fountain of Life says I am thirsty – I thirst. The one who said “let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.” (John 7:38)

The second river is named Gihon; it flows through the land of Cush. Gihon means bursting forth or gushing. God is not just concerned about us experiencing fullness on a personal level. If we move beyond “fullness” and are “bursting forth” (experiencing an overflow), then the nature and character of God coming out of us will be experienced by those around us. In another midday encounter when Jesus was thirsty, he says to the Samaritan woman, “Anyone who drinks the water I give will never thirst — not ever. The water I give will be an artesian spring within, gushing fountains of endless life.” (John 4:14 Message)

The message of Gihon is that we are not merely living lives of survival or success, but to move beyond that and truly live lives of significance—not merely focusing on what we need or want for ourselves, but on what we can contribute to others.

As Jesus hangs on the cross and thirsts we are reminded that our lives are not our own, but like Jesus we are called to sacrifice it for others.

The third river is named Hiddekel and flows east of Assyria. Hiddekel means swift or darting, a “word picture” of a swift arrow in flight. It is not a picture of an arrow in a quiver or lying passively on the ground, but a swift arrow in flight. Before an arrow is ever released from a bow, it is first of all aimed at a target.

Like the Hiddekel river it flows, journeying from beginning to end. The purpose of Jesus' life was leading to this point -when he was lifted up he would draw all peoples to himself (John 12:32). With the water of life flowing through us we are transformed to be as God intended and created us to be. We are not to be aimless and ambiguous in our lives. We are to be like swift arrows in flight. Paul said that he ran with purpose in every step (1 Corinthians 9:26, NLT).

The fourth river is the Euphrates. Euphrates means sweet or fruitful. With the first three rivers flowing in our lives (fullness, overflow, and purpose) that it will result in us experiencing sweetness and fruitfulness. This water is so sweet that we do not want to stop drinking it. The more we drink it the more we will grow the fruits of the Spirit. Of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5: 22-23). This sweetness isn't just for our own enjoyment, either. Paul said "...he uses us to spread the knowledge of Christ everywhere, like a sweet perfume" (2 Corinthians 2:14 NLT).

The journey of the river from source to the ocean is like the journey of our lives, like Jesus' life, through different seasons, in parched and desert lands, in wilderness, from Gethsemane to this Golgotha. This Golgotha is not like a garden but here Jesus is heading towards the tomb.

The Euphrates in Genesis also speaks prophetically of the river in Ezekiel chapter 47 and in Revelation chapter 22 at the end of the bible. It is like a thread that weaves its way through God's word as does the narrative of Jesus' life flowing from Alpha to Omega, beginning and end.

As Jesus hangs on the cross, thirsting, his life ebbing away, he turns to one of the others being executed alongside him and says, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23:43) Jesus points to where he is going and we are reminded of this final garden.

"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever." (Revelation 22:1-5 NIV)



Tears in the garden

I was so tired. I'd never known a week like it. My emotions were all over the place.

I thought after all this time I was really getting to know Jesus; to understand how he ticks, what he believes and how he reacts. But this week has completely floored me. I'm not sure I know anything about him.

After the highs of that day (was it less than a week ago?) when we followed him into Jerusalem; him riding the young colt, everyone waving palm branches, and shouting their praises, I really thought that at last people were recognising him for who he truly is. But then this week and especially last night I now feel very fearful about the future.

As usual, at the end of the meal he set out to walk up the Mount of Olives. Sometimes he's gone on his own, but last night we all followed.

When he reached his normal place, most of the disciples were only too glad to take the weight off their feet. They sank to the ground and I think some fell asleep straight away. I don't think they even heard Jesus say 'Pray that you will not fall into temptation'. I looked around and those who were still awake I could tell didn't know what he was talking about. But whereas they just shook their heads and carried on talking or preparing to sleep it just raised my concern. Something was different about Jesus tonight. What was going on? I found myself choking back the tears.

Jesus took himself off a little way apart. He knelt down and started praying. I've always been fascinated to watch Jesus praying. He obviously has such a close relationship with God, something I don't understand but actually feel quite envious about. But as I watched, I saw the raw emotion in a way I'd never known before. Jesus, already on his knees fell forward, his head almost touching the ground. He started groaning and I wondered if he was in pain. It even seemed as though he was crying but I can't be sure about that. Whatever was happening was incredibly powerful and real. Then I thought I heard the words 'Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done'. I didn't understand that at all. What was the cup he was talking about? What was it that his Father was asking of him? Something (or someone?) was obviously causing him so much pain. How could anyone do that to Jesus of all people? I was aware that my eyelids were dropping. The emotion of the last 24

hours was catching up on me. And then the next thing I remember is hearing the words; “Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation”

I jumped up with a start. How could I have done this? Jesus had become such a close friend and was such an important part of my life and yet at this time of great need in his life, when he needed me to do something for him I’d abandoned him. Suddenly it all made sense. He was waiting for my prayer and I had done exactly what he said not to do – ‘give in to temptation’. The tears came again, but this time I didn’t brush them aside, I couldn’t. I had the overwhelming feeling that when I had seen Jesus weeping earlier he had been weeping for me.

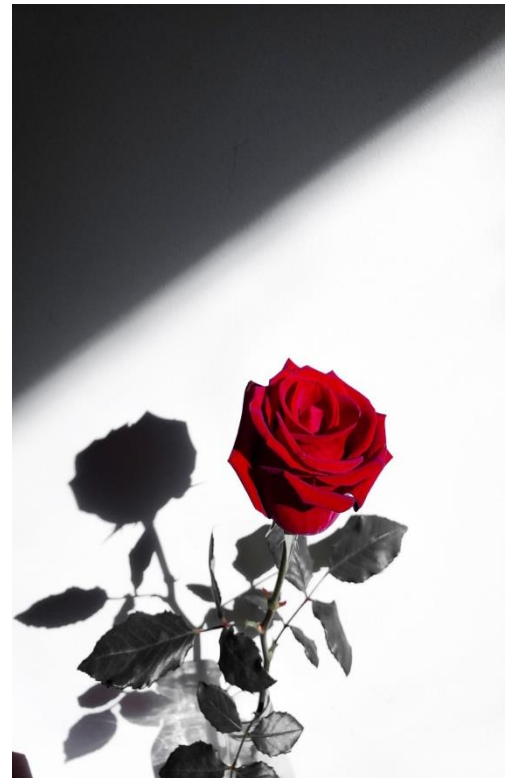


A Garden of Hope

*O love that will not let me go
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.*

*O joy that sleekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain
And feel the promise is not vain,
That morn shall tearless be.*

*O cross that liftest up my head,
I dare not ask to fly from thee;
I lay in dust life's glory dead,
And from the ground there blossoms red
Life that shall endless be.*



Many years ago I saw a painting of a discarded crown of thorns. One of its thorns had taken root and from it a beautiful red rose was growing. Under the painting, the last two lines of the above hymn were written. Meditating on the picture and the words, I felt that the rose represented for me, the new life which became available to each and every one of us because of what Jesus death on the cross accomplished. All he asked of us was to believe who he was--- and is. It is hard to fully comprehend the immense, painful, excruciating, willing sacrifice he made for each one of us. But God knew that nothing less would do. The amazing thing is that the cross demands a personal response from each one of us. It was a world changing event, but the response must be individual rather than collective.

"It is finished"

Your dying words uttered from a place of such anguish.

"It is finished"

Sin is conquered and love has overcome death.

"It is finished"

So that I can be redeemed and forgiven.

"It is finished"

So that I can take hold of your wounded, outstretched hand.

"It is finished"

So that I can know God's love within a loving relationship with him.

"It is finished."

So that I can know life in all its fullness.

"It is finished."

So that I can know life that will endless be.

"It is finished."

So that I can know deep joy which gives me strength.

"It is finished."

So that I can know love that will not ever let me go.

"Love so amazing, so divine

Demands my soul, my life, my all."

Are you willing to respond to that demand?



