

EASTER 3 2022 ST GEORGE'S WINDSOR

According to our reading from St John's Gospel, after his resurrection from the dead, Jesus asked Simon Peter three times, "Do you love me?" I shall return to those words in a short while. For now, I want to home in on the rather unlikely topic of 'gardening'.

Recently, I was given a present. It was a book. The book is called, "The Doctor's Garden", written by the historian Clare Hickman. Its subtitle is, "Medicine, Science, and Horticulture in Britain." It is not the kind of book I should have purchased for myself. However, I am now delighted to have been given it, and to have read it.

Centred upon the Quaker doctor John Lettsom and his country house and Garden at Grove Hill in south east London, the book tells the story of the evolution of the country house garden during the second part of the eighteenth century. The author calls on evidence from the lives of other medics, who were sometimes Quakers too, who purchased country houses, and designed and developed gardens.

These gardens, often starting as 'physic' gardens for the growth of herbs as medicine, gradually developed into centres of botanical learning, places of both utility and beauty, and increasingly centres of peaceful recreation. The gardens' designs were inspired by rational, moral, aesthetic and spiritual intentions. It is not surprising therefore that the author of the book talks of the garden at Grove Hill as a place where, "nature has been tamed" and has become a "recreated Eden". There is more to gardening than we might think at first. Perhaps it is an expression of our deep-down need to restore to a chaotic, dis-eased and unhappy world, what we sense to have been an original or intended 'order' and, while we can, to enjoy that sense of 'order'.

As I read 'The Doctor's Garden', I could not help but remember a poem by Elizabeth Jennings published just a little over twenty five years ago. The poem is called "Order" and is about gardening. In the course of only fourteen lines she writes, with reference to Eden: "After we / Were driven from that garden, we've shown how / There must be patterns." And: "In our wild world of misrule we insist / On shapeliness and balance." Then she concludes: "We make curious / Designs for garden beds. O we exist / To make new order since our Eden loss."

There is something persistent and insistent about our human make-up that, even while we contribute to the world's disruption, makes us hunger for 'order'.

That hunger for order is of course expressed (and, to some extent satisfied) in the harmony of music, the symmetry of poetry, the elegance of dance and the niceness of mathematics. We find it too in some less likely places. Some years ago, the writer P. D. James wrote a book about detective fiction. She claimed: "There is comfort in reading something with a puzzle at its heart which is solved by the end of the book, with order being restored." She writes, if my notes are accurate, of the human yearning for something that "confirms our belief, despite some evidence to the contrary, that we live in a rational, comprehensible and moral universe."

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But what has this to do with the post-resurrection and post-breakfast conversation between Jesus and Simon Peter?

In all four Gospels, in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, we read of Simon Peter's threefold denials of Jesus before his crucifixion. The fact that those denials are recorded in all four Gospels is evidence that their offence was widely and deeply felt in the early Christian community. You might say that the 'moral order' had been fractured by three lies that left Jesus Christ abandoned and alone.

Here however, after breakfast by the Sea of Tiberias, it seems that Jesus works to mend things; to restore and re-make a kind of harmony; some order. Three times, he invites Simon Peter to affirm his love for him. Three times Peter does so. The consequences of the three denials are now healed. The neat balance between three denials and three assurances of love speaks, to those with ears to hear, of the restoration of that 'order' that we seek.

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Yet we must note this. Albeit that we express our hunger for that 'order' in our gardening, our music, our poetry and dance and mathematics, and even in our reading of detective stories, it is the voice of Jesus Christ that effects the miracle for which we long. That voice, the voice of one who has endured the very worst that we dis-ordered human beings can inflict upon our own kind, is the voice of forgiveness. That is the voice that Simon Peter heard transmitted through the questions Jesus asked of him. No other voice could commend and command a new beginning; no other voice could restore any kind of 'order'.

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We are living though outrageously dis-ordered times; times during which too many lies leave too many people at the mercy of the worst that we human beings can inflict upon our own kind. We do not underestimate the consequences of the

likes of Simon Peter's three denials. And, amidst all the clamour, we find it almost impossible to hear Christ's declaration that forgiveness must have the final say. Yet, hard though it is for us, when we are driven by so much anger and despair, we are called to remember that, for the sake of the eventual 'order' of humanity, it is our responsibility, as followers of Jesus Christ, to hold fast to that belief. 'Revenge' has no place in our vocabulary.

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Elizabeth Jennings wrote, "O we exist / To make new order since our Eden loss." Not in our own strength shall we do so, but maybe, through God's grace, and always no doubt in the tiniest of ways in our own lives, we can be channels of Christ's forgiveness; instruments of that reconciliation that is at the heart of the restoration of 'order'.

The Right Reverend David Conner, KCVO