

## Easter 5 2009

*Acts 8:26-end; 1 John 4:7-end; John 15:1-8*

There's a traditional Dutch Carol which, in its rather quaint English translation, goes like this: 'King Jesus hath a garden, full of divers flowers, where I go culling posies gay, all times and hours'. In this garden, particular flowers are associated with the Christian graces, or the 'fruits of the Spirit' as we might say – the Lily with Chastity, the Violet (with sweet perfume) Humility, etc., until at its heart, following a list of flowers and associated qualities comes a verse highlighting the centrality of Jesus himself: 'Yet, 'mid the brave, the bravest prize of all may claim the star of Bethlehem – Jesus – blessed be his Name!'

And yet, the feature of the carol which most endears itself to me is the refrain which comes between each verse, which lists the things that might be *heard* in this garden of Jesus, rather than seen or smelt. This list, which might have reinforced the sense of decorum and tameness of the flowers – all in their 'right place', presents us instead with a wildly contrasted set of sounds, which wouldn't naturally expect to blend together:

There naught is heard but Paradise bird, Harp, dulcimer, lute,  
With cymbal, trump and tymbal, and the soothing flute.

Despite its seeming less a matter of 'naught...but' as 'anything goes'(!), I like to see this refrain as completing the picture of God's garden more in the sense we've just heard Jesus describe – of himself as 'the vine', us as 'the branches', and God, his Father, as the 'gardener'.

The problem with gardening metaphors for the ways of God is that they can conjure up in our minds unhelpful models of nature tamed and brought into submission, perhaps like the great baroque Gardens of the Royal Palace of Versailles. From a model like that you could take the message that in spiritual terms we must simply knuckle-down to pale Christian 'good form' and respectability – not rocking the boat, for fear of punishment from that great 'pruner in the sky'. But the picture presented to us in this passage – one of the closest things we get to a parable in the Gospel of John – is far more dynamic than that. The specific setting of the vineyard is one far more productive, and the pruning in that setting is so integral as to make the picture far more fluid. Christian writers in more recent times have expressed this vital fluidity in their titles, e.g., C.S. Lewis' *Surprised by Joy*, and Gerard Hughes' 'God of Surprises'; no 'docile conformism' there.

Just before this passage, Jesus has been promising the disciples the gift of ‘the Counsellor’, or ‘Advocate’ – the Holy Spirit – after his departure, and it’s that dimension that lies behind this fluid language of ‘vine’, ‘branches’, and ‘gardener’. *We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit* as the first letter of John expresses it. As we’ve seen over the last few Sundays, the writer of 1 John stresses *love* as the hallmark of this dynamic relationship: *God is love* he says. *Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.*

In the instalment of the unfolding story of the early church we heard from ‘Acts’ to start with this morning, we saw that dynamic relationship acted-out with extreme faith and openness in the example of Philip, who was led, as it were by instinct, to a certain place to encounter an Ethiopian eunuch, to whom he was to expound the Word of God and convince him that that Word has its fulfilment in Jesus of Nazareth. It’s a story that can leave us unmoved in the cold rational light of today. Because ‘hearing voices’ is something we tend to be suspicious of, we can close our minds to the excitement of this almost chance encounter, borne entirely out of Philip’s love for, and obedience to Christ, and the picture it gives of history in the making. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church to this day celebrates this conversion as a starting point to their original reception of the Gospel, and the simple courageous obedience of Philip to the Holy Spirit (however the calling and inspiration formed in his consciousness) is recorded throughout this chapter of the ‘Acts’. Earlier in it we read of his preaching and performing healing miracles and other wonders in Samaria. Significantly, what had precipitated this missionary activity was trauma and great changes, as we read in Acts that following the execution of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, ‘a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem’. It’s as though we can see here the pruning process within the life of the earliest church, as its centre of operations in the developing spread of the Gospel was to move gradually away from Jerusalem, and established, even hallowed, patterns of behaviour and worship needed to be relinquished.

For us now, conscious as we may be of living in a society which has moved on 2,000 years in its world-view, it’s no less important that we embrace the possibilities of living in such a union with God that allows us to be branches in the vine of Christ, pruned and cultivated by the Spirit of God. Living merely as ‘self-made’ men and women may be the prevailing attitude of our times, but it is not the Christian way, and it can be a distinctly lonely one. When the ‘cymbal’ crash and jarring ‘trump’ of stresses and challenges enter

*our* world, as persecutions did those first Christians, we can find ourselves perplexed, fearful, and questioning our faith. But living within the mutuality of the love of God can sustain us with ‘the soothing flute’ of assurance, because as we heard in John’s first letter, *perfect love drives out fear*.

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