

Revd Andrew Walker - Prayer and the Art of Gardening

Talk given at 25th Anniversary Celebration at St John's Waterloo, London on 20 May 2017

Thinking about gardening and prayer the spiritual writer who most comes to mind is Teresa of Avila who uses the analogy of watering the garden for prayer and the spiritual life. For her, the garden is a metaphor; the earth is the soul and water is God's grace. She talks about four stages in this journey of the spiritual life, the journey of bringing water to the earth so that the garden might grow. :

- ❖ A beginner must look upon themselves as one setting out to make a garden for his Lord's pleasure on most unfruitful soil which abounds in weeds. His majesty roots up the weeds and will put in good plants instead. In the very first stage of watering these plants, planted by God's majesty, water needs to be brought from a well. It is drawn from the well by one's own effort and then the pail carried across the garden by one's own effort. Here we struggle to deal with distractions in prayer, withdrawing our minds from the daily events of life and the distractions of the outside world, struggling to focus, seeking penitence and meditating upon God and upon Jesus. It can be a slow and sometimes a painful stage in the spiritual life involving considerable strain and effort on our part.
- ❖ Teresa then moves to the second stage whereby one draws water by means of a windlass, a kind of pulley which most of us will only have seen in American Western movies. In this way we are aided by God and it is much more about the prayer of quiet. Less labour is required because of the pulley system drawing the water up but the pail still needs to be carried across the garden to the plants. The soul becomes increasingly recollected. One still strains, there is still effort, but the burden is much less. We are starting to be won over by the Divine and we have a greater and deeper understanding of spiritual things. We begin that process of detachment.
- ❖ The third stage for Teresa is a garden in which water courses have been built, channels that flow through the garden like some of those Arabic gardens one sees in Spain. We no longer must work or strain so continuously, simply strive to leave ourselves open for divine understanding. The Lord, in her phraseology, is beginning to take over our work and become the gardener himself.
- ❖ The fourth stage Teresa likens to rain falling on earth. We simply do nothing, the rain arrives, we make no effort and no strain and this is prayer for her of union and, though temporary, it is a perfect union. We are simply the recipients of God's grace.

That's perhaps the most famous analogy.

John of the Cross another Spanish mystic of the same century was himself a keen gardener. He took an interest in the gardens of the Descalced Carmelites as communities began to be founded around Spain. I have a fancy that the tiered garden in monastery at Segovia which dates from this time might have been laid out by him, with the different tiers representing the different levels on his mountain of perfection.

Their Carmelite descendant, Teresa of Liseux, one of my least favourite saints, was to have a massive effect on 20th century spirituality in her democratization of religious experience. She was known as The Little Flower and we in the West are incalculably in her debt.

Turning from the Carmelite tradition to the Ignatian tradition, something close to my heart, I searched through the writings of Ignatius, another of the Spanish mystics to my mind, but sadly he

doesn't seem so much interested in gardening. He talks a lot of exercise in his Exercises but he refers to running and walking not digging and hoeing. For a minor Spanish noble, perhaps, gardening was too much associated with the humble provision of fruit and vegetables rather than the more patrician pursuit of horticulture.

So what about the parallels? I have 5 to suggest to you and after each I am going to pause and offer a question for a few moments of silent reflection. If the question is useful that's great, if not, don't worry, simply enjoy the quiet of this place.

Teresa's story of co-operation in the gardening or the watering of the garden, between the individual and the Lord, brings about the first topic which is that of **co-operation**.

There's an old story of an old cottage gardener in a little village busy with his antirrhinums and phlox in the garden in its May/June perfection of colour and productivity. The vicar passes one day and congratulates him on the beauty of his garden. The old man pauses, looks around and says, "Yes I've done a very good job indeed, haven't I?" The vicar is a bit put out and says "Well to be honest, I think you ought to give the credit to God. It's God who created the plants, gave the sun to warm them and help them grow and provides the water to enable them into life and productivity." The old man thinks and responds, "This house had no-one living it for about 20 years and you should have seen it when I took it over and only God was looking after it."

Co-operation is the heart of what we're about in gardening and in the spiritual life. In gardening you need to co-operate with nature, whether it's a high rainfall or low rainfall, you have to co-operate with the soil whether it's heavy or light, acid or alkaline. If azaleas are your favourite plant there's no good moving to an area with high alkaline soil and then complaining about the results and in any large garden teamwork with others is vital. In prayer too we have to co-operate with the gifts of the spirit, with the desire and will of our God. We can't be too wedded to our own goals and our own preferences; to beliefs and assumptions about better ways of praying.

There is the old adage 'pray as you can, not as you think you ought' and that very much goes for gardening too. I have an allotment and I have now to restrict my time there to one and half or two hours. More than that, my back gives out and my next day's work suffers. I have to co-operate with my physical ability. In prayer I love Ignation imaginative contemplation but I have to accept that for me it only works at times of retreat and is inaccessible during times of daily prayer. I have to co-operate with that even if I wish it were different.

There is a phrase in Anglican eucharistic prayer 'it is our duty and our joy' and I want to suggest those 2 ingredients as we reflect on prayer and the spiritual life. I could reframe it as **discipline, artistry and a little foolishness**.

So the second parallel is **discipline** – a rigour and commitment to daily prayer – maybe formal matins, evensong or a short time of silence at the beginning of the day. For some, it may be making the sign of the cross before falling asleep, for others praying for the needs of the world. It seems to me that for the spiritual life to grow there is a need for some commitment to the discipline, however small but regular, of time which we choose to set aside for God. That may be separate to daily activity or committing to prayer alongside an existing activity which absorbs our body but leaves our heart and our spirit free - like travelling on the bus or washing up. We need, for example, commitment in any intercessory prayer to balance the personal and communal, the local and the global. We need honesty about what we desire for any particular situation or outcome and to balance this with the need at all times to put God's will and desire first. The disciplines required in a garden are no less rigorous. When you pot on the seedlings, prune certain

species, enrich the soil, cut the meadows, you can't choose a time which suits you, the time and the season are critical for them.

That raises the question how to we balance discipline and freedom, realise that discipline leads to freedom, that liberation can result from commitment. So in prayer I may reflect here on the forms known as meditation and intercession. In gardening, there is planning and keeping on top of the seasonal tasks. ***My question to you in the silence*** is - *What does the word discipline evoke in you, or your life at the moment – in gardening or in prayer or in both? Is it a burden or liberator, does it channel your energies or restrict them?*

So from collaboration and discipline I want to move to **artistry**. Artistry is a vital part of the gardener's task. What combinations of colour and texture are we choosing to work towards, whether we have a balcony, a pot, front lawn or an acre or two. What mood or effect do we want to create in this corner or that? How can we balance what will emerge here at this point in the year with what will be its neighbour at another? How can we plant bulbs under a tree which flowers two months later? The gardener's task at this point is often compared to that of the conductor of an orchestra, mindful of all the possible instruments of the score and of the audience and of the acoustic of the concert hall. How can one balance all of those and bring forth the best possible performance?

In prayer, it seems to me, to relate to the topic of discernment. How can we sift, how can we work out, what is creative and useful and avoid that which is less good? Say for the question which often arises for people – when I experience dryness or difficulty in prayer from time to time, what is it about? Is what I experience a sign that I need to change my pattern or way of praying. Is it God saying let's move into a different way, a new way for the next stage of your spiritual journey? Or is it an invitation to stick with it, endure it because it's part of the wider conversion of will. Part of the question that American Jesuit John Futrell asks "Are we in God for the consolations of God, or instead for the God of consolations?" Naturally in prayer from time to time the consolations of prayer will seem to disappear. Are we praying because we get a lot out of it or are we praying because we desire God? That needs sifting, that needs discernment, that needs artistry. Here prayer which is imaginative, the prayer of silence and also prayer of colloquy - a conversation as with a friend – Jesus, Mary, walking in the cool of the garden (that memorable Genesis phrase), listening, speaking, enjoying time together, - prayer that allows the spirit to wander together.

In gardening this is about creativity and contemplation. When I joined Great Dixter as a volunteer, Fergus Garrett the head gardener said, "When you arrive just spend 10 or 15 minutes walking round the garden and looking, see what's changed, what needs doing, what's at its peak just to be enjoyed. Before the tasks of the day, contemplate and see what it is you're about". ***So my question for you in the moments of silence*** "What of artistry in your own life whether in prayer or gardening or life in general? May be artistry that is already manifest and should be celebrated or it may be artistry that is pushing to be manifested and so to be reflected upon."

Collaboration, discipline, artistry and now a **little foolishness**. At Dixter I was asked to weed the flagstone courtyard that overlooks the exotic garden and formal topiary in meadow grass. Fergus came to see how I was doing. And just in the middle of the terrace which I hadn't got to yet, was a dandelion about to come into flower, and he said "Oh do leave that for now". I was very taken aback but two days later it was a magnificent bloom set off by an expanse of perfectly weeded silver grey stone. It caused comment among the visitors.

Foolishness – we need to allow play in prayer, talking to God, allowing for the surprises of the Holy Spirit. One of my spiritual directors in the early 90s said to me "Instead of the usual examen

at the end of the day, ask “What has God got to be grateful to me for today?”. I was horrified and it was one of the hardest tasks I have undertaken. But it allowed for play, for difference, for seeing things differently. This reminds me of a poem by Sufi poet Hafiz

‘It used to be
That when I would wake in the morning
I could with confidence say,
”What am ‘I’ going to do?”
That was before the seed cracked open.
Now Hafiz is certain:
There are two of us housed in this body,
Doing the shopping together in the market and
Tickling each other while fixing the evening’s food.
Now when I awake all the internal instruments play the same music:
”God, what love-mischief can ‘We’ do
For the world
Today?”

Foolishness removes us from the power of the rational function and it undermines the overstrong ego. In prayer it allows for the God of surprises and in the garden it reminds us that the garden is supposed to be a place of fun, enjoyment, rest as well as work. Many garden structures are called follies! ***So my question** What does the word folly mean to you? What are the possibilities of love mischief in your life?*

Finally to **reversal**. Gardening and prayer – activities that help us see things differently from the norm. If you threw open your curtains and see rain, the gardeners amongst us rejoice, normal people might well be wishing for a warm, dry and sunny day. Spirituality too helps us see things differently and we can gain insights into the priorities of God being different to the priorities of the world. In our present world we prefer to be rich rather than poor, educated rather than less well educated, wellness is better than being sick and to be young is better than to be old. But in the priorities of the kingdom and in God’s eyes none of those make any difference whatsoever to his love and his desire for us. I’ve been to a couple of non-Christian funerals recently and on each occasion death was seen as the coming of the night, the end of the day of life – it seems to me a common perception on the part of many. But for the Christian of course, the gospel proclaims that we are in the dark and what is coming after death is the dawning of the new day. Darkness is the womb from which we were born into life and the darkness of death leads to resurrection. There are different priorities, different ways of doing and seeing. The priorities of Holy Week and of Jesus’s passion show that death is not the end but can be the means of something else something better. In the Christian tradition this relates to the gift of indifference, sometimes translated as detachment, a word we share with other spiritual traditions, which means not caring about things but caring more for the perception and love of God than for anything else. It is a reversal of some of the norms of our world and that reminds me of that poem

On prayer by Czeslaw Milosz

You ask me how to pray to someone who is not.
All I know is that prayer constructs a velvet bridge
And walking it we are aloft, as on a springboard,
Above landscapes the colour of ripe gold
Transformed by a magic stopping of the sun.
That bridge leads to the shore of Reversal
Where everything is just the opposite and the word *is*

Unveils a meaning we hardly envisioned.
Notice: I say we; there, every one separately,
Feels compassion for others entangled in the flesh.

And knows that if there is no other shore
We will walk that aerial bridge all the same.

Where everything is just the opposite and the word *is*
Unveils a meaning we hardly envisioned.

One could almost think of Alice in Wonderland there as well.

I have a ***reflective prayer exercise*** to end this time together but before that I suggest you turn to your neighbour and in Ignation tradition of Examen, look for moments of consolation, desolation and insight. So in the day so far, “*What touched you or warmed you or gave you energy (consolation)? What was of less interest or seemed irrelevant (desolation)? What would you like to carry away that has meaning for you (insight)?*”

For this last bit we’ll go back to Teresa’s image of the soul as a garden and it’s ***a guided meditation, visualisation.***

I invite you to find a comfortable but poised place on your chairand we are here today in the presence of our God. ... Take a few deep breaths and notice how you are in your body, perhaps feeling the chair supporting you, noticing whether you’re tired or hungry, rested or replete, the body is part of God’s gift and part of your incarnation. So celebrate and acknowledge this part of your human existence.

Then turn your attention to your mind, notice your thoughts from the day from the news from home or work, take stock of this part of God’s gift to you, your incarnation.

Then shift your attention to your heart, your emotions, checking in with how you’re feeling, acknowledging this part of God’s gift to you, this part of your incarnation and truth.

Then when you’re your ready to, travel to the deepest and freest place available to you within, a place of comparative centredness and peace.

In your imagination I want to invite you to go for a short walk on a warm and sunny day in May down a little lane, maybe one you’re familiar with, maybe one that’s new to you ... and there is a wall that you are walking alongside and you see a gate in the wall, the birds are singing and the sun is shining.

You know that when you reach the gate you’re going to go in through it to a garden, your garden, the garden of your soul.

So imagine yourself walking along beside the wall, notice what the wall is made of, brick or stone, smooth or rough, urban or rural and you come to the gate. Notice the gate, what it is made of, high or low, can you see through or not, pause for a moment and then push the gate open and walk into this garden, the garden of your soul.

Once through the gate just stop and look about you, what lies in front of you by way of paths or grass, borders or beds, what the parameters and perimeters are. Feel the warmth of the sun the sound of some birds.

I invite you to stroll gently around whatever part of the garden you wish. Find a bench or a verge where you can sit for a moment, somewhere to sit and to pause and as often the case with gardeners see what needs to be done. Is there anything that needs watering or pruning or weeding, maybe there is maybe there isn’t. Just notice them if there are. Is there any part of the garden of your soul which needs watering, pruning or weeding?

Planning for the next season, is there anything which needs sowing, planting up or buying in to help this garden that you would like to do to make it more fun, more enjoyable for yourself or for others for the future.

Just enjoy what is there now, what has been brought about by your labours and God's grace,
Whether the garden is wild or formal makes no matter it is yours and it is God's so just enjoy and
rest in it for a moment or two.

In terms of our reflection today, I invite you to get up in your imagination, move towards the gate
to leave your full awareness of this place for the moment, knowing you can return in your
consciousness if you wish at any time, because it is always there and always part of God's gift to
you.

Find your way slowly and gently back to the gate, closing it behind you if you wish or leaving it
open, then turning back down the lane beside the wall, to find yourself where you began this
reflection.

Bring your attention back to your body, sitting on the chair in this church as we all are together.

I will now bring this time together to a close by saying the poem On Prayer again.

You ask me how to pray to someone who is not.
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Andrew Walker May 2017