



**Quiet Garden Movement**  
sharing outdoor space for the inner journey

## **Talk by Bishop Graham Usher at Quiet Garden Movement Annual Gathering 2018**

Thank you very much for this invitation to have a chat with you this morning. I've long been an admirer of the work of the Trust and, in different places, have come across Quiet Gardens and valued the opportunity to spend time in them. So thank you for all that you do, in so many different ways, to enable people to encounter God in their lives through the delight of being in a garden. Isn't it great that winter finally feels as if it's nearly over, though we've had this relapse in the last day or two? I had to put my cloches down last night, when I felt that it's getting a bit cold again. But there is nothing quite like a warm summer's evening. The rays of sun just touching your cheek, a glass of Prosecco in your hand, shoes kicked off and walking across the gentle turf of freshly cut grass; the sound of bumblebees and the smell of lavender.

I wonder what your ideal garden is? I've cultivated five gardens in my life. My first garden was a small patch round the back of the coal bunker, given to me by my dad because nothing else would grow there. I think I got that little bit of earth when I was about six or seven and it's probably the bit of earth I know the very best because for about 10 years, until I became a bolshi older teenager and lost interest, I cultivated that little piece of ground. I think the plants were dug up almost daily and the roots kissed – or so my parents embarrassingly tell me. But in that little patch of ground behind the coal bunker, I learnt to garden. I grew seeds and I grew lettuces and other things. I grew flowering plants and I even had a sunken pond, just as they had on Blue Peter, in which I had newts and sticklebacks, all collected from the field drains around the village in North Yorkshire where I grew up. That little piece of ground was heaven on earth for me.

And since I was ordained, I have inherited four different gardens. Often I've inherited the gardens after a period of a vacancy when God has done the gardening and God's not a very good gardener left to God's own devices! My first garden when I entered a curacy was a small garden, probably about the size of our gathering space here. It had had nothing done to it for six months so the churchwarden thought it'd be good to send his son with a strimmer a few days before I arrived. His son thought it would be very nice to just strim the whole garden but leave little circular patches of weeds and grass in different artistic places. Then in the centre of Middlesbrough - we arrived there and my first job was to collect the hypodermic needles from the garden and that was a regular theme for the five years we were there because they would get chucked over the garden fence along with other things. Creating somewhere of beauty in a place where there were deck access flats all around looking down, I found to be something really important to do. In Hexham, I inherited a kind of northern garden and quickly planted lots of fruit bushes and raspberries which just grew fantastically in that climate. My successor says to me that she's always overrun with too many raspberries. "Well, send them south", I keep saying to her. In Dudley, I've inherited a 3 acre garden. Two acres is woodland which we've been trying to bring under management to provide timber for a wood burner. Part of that sawing down and making clearings has been remarkable because things that haven't seen the light of day for decades suddenly have and last year just a few daffodils appeared in a clearing in the wood and this spring the whole clearing is full of daffodils. None of those bulbs have been planted by me, it's nature finding its way to exert itself, coming up out of the ground - a great bank of daffodils and one solitary red tulip. So slowly,

slowly, we are creating a garden there and the last couple of years it been a delight to open it for various charitable events and also to have it open during June for clergy in the diocese to come and have quiet days. That has been a joy to do.

“The best place to find God is in a garden” wrote George Bernard Shaw, “you can dig for him there.” Or there’s that twee garden sign that you see in so many garden centres “One is nearer God’s heart in a garden than anywhere else on earth”. Victor Hugo wrote a description in *Les Miserables*, “He sat on a wooden bench leaning against the decrepit trellis and looked at the stars through the irregular outlines of his fruit trees. His quarter of an acre of ground so sparingly planted, so cluttered with shed and ruins, was dear to him and satisfied him. What more was needed by this old man who divided the leisure hours of his life, when he had so little leisure, between gardening in the daytime and contemplation at night. Was this narrow enclosure with the sky for a background not space enough for him to adore God in his most beautiful sublime works? Indeed is that not everything? What more do you need? A little garden to walk in and immensity to reflect on. At his feet something to cultivate and gather; above his head something to study and meditate on - a few flowers on earth and all the stars in heaven”.

If these three quotes are true, I wonder why? What is a garden? I want to speak about a garden being a place of enclosure, of display, of tendering, of secrets, of production, of manipulation, of regeneration and change. The Hebrew word for garden is ‘gan’. The root of the word signifies protection or shelter, to be passed over and survive, and of course gardens in the Middle East are often enclosed places. If you are walking in the streets of Jerusalem you don’t realise there are any gardens, that there are some beautiful gardens in the courtyards. Just as in many European cities they are hidden away, enclosed places, places of intimacy, separated from outside forces. Whatever their style, these are often special places, set aside places, in which we can be amazed.

Gardens are often places of display. It is amazing to go to the Three Counties Show and see the displays of special plants and vegetables and other things that people have tended and grown. But also you can contrast the Japanese Zen garden and its moments of calm or the ornate very structured gardens of Versailles making a political statement of French power and wealth. I wonder what will become of that tree planted yesterday by the leaders in North and South Korea taking soil and water from both parts of that peninsula; the tree was originally a seed planted in the year of the divide of these nations. I wonder what that will come to signify in the future? That tree that is obviously about display, about making a statement. Isn’t it interesting that we can find some of the best metaphors in the natural world of what our hope is for the future? Think for example, of how an olive tree has been used down through the centuries. So places of enclosure, places of display, of stating something, places of tendering.

When I was on sabbatical in 2011 I spent some of the time in the Amazon. We had a link diocese with my parish. The thing that amazed me about visiting some of these remote villages in the Amazon where there are small Anglican communities, was how people had gathered from the forest beautiful flowering plants and planted them around their small huts and planted herbs by their homes. These plants were particularly tended and looked after and I discovered also that often plants are put on top of the graves of loved ones. So a plant is chosen for the loved one who has died - how much nicer than polished granite stone to have something living and breathing over you.

The place of tendering: we tend our gardens, nurture them, have a sense of sadness when some plant has died. The most precious plants in my garden are some spring onions. I was devastated when they just died two or three years ago so I got some more from my dad who has kept the spring onions going. Because these spring onions came from my great-grandfather and they went to my grandfather and then my father and now to me. And that's the most precious plant because they are part of a family story. As I walk around my garden, so many plants bring back memories of people and places and stories.

Gardens are also places of production, of cultivating cut flowers, of bringing in the harvest; something deeply satisfying for those of us who grow vegetables to have a plate of food we have grown ourselves. I'm also a bee-keeper and this time of year until July is quite a busy time and an anxious time as you don't want them swarming. You are continually manipulating the colony to make sure it's thriving and that it will be bringing in lots and lots of honey. A place of production where we are continually trying to thwart nature, to shape and mould the garden in the way that we would love it to be. And that's not just forcing our rhubarb so we can have it earlier in the year, but how we cut and prune and plant to create something beautiful out of the natural forces of nature.

And then gardens as places of regeneration. My parish in Middlesbrough now has the unenviable accolade of having the highest child poverty in the UK. When I was vicar there, the thing we talked about quite often was creating beauty - in worship, in song and in the public realm of the community, but beauty also in the church and in the remarkable garden inside the church. The original church was burnt down in 1977 (by the diocesan arsonist). A new church was built in the sanctuary and a garden was created within the walls which were left up to the arches with no roof. It is a wonderful garden and has recently had a refresh with a labyrinth created and prayer stations - art and beautiful plants in a parish that has very little beauty. It is all Victorian terracing with backyards and no gardens and this garden is like a lung in the centre of that community; a place of quiet, of fresh air, of greenery in a concrete area. The area had a lot of money poured into it in terms of regeneration but this garden was relatively cheap to do. It has now lasted 10 years and is such a joy and a delight in that community. So I think gardens have a very important part to play in regeneration. In hospitals, it's proven that if you have a view out of your hospital window that looks out at trees, you will get better quicker and be discharged earlier.

Gardens are also places of change; we see that slow arc of a garden changing through the course of the seasons, the miracle of each day, and suddenly after a long winter the garden comes to life and nothing can stop it. We spend the next few weeks pulling out those weeds that have grown almost overnight, the colours changing daily as at the moment.

The Bible mentions gardens fairly frequently. Those gardens are often for the wealthy and never in the Bible is a royal garden the site of God's activity. But I want to just explore with you a few of the key gardens that we encounter in the Bible - the garden of Eden, the garden of Gethsemane, the garden of resurrection and the garden of the end of time. As we turn the pages of the Bible, in the very first pages we encounter how God planted a garden in Eden, a garden in the East looking towards the sunrise. As the garden of Eden has grown in our imaginations so it's a garden that is filled with trees, a kind of heavenly arboretum; a pleasant place to look at and a place filled with food. In that garden is a river that divides the garden in four. Adam is placed in the garden to till it and to keep it. 'Till' that word that resonates with the word to serve, to watch over, to protect. Adam has this dual calling of both tilling and keeping so that it is cared for and delighted in. As the story goes, sin comes in and destroys all that has been. There is that remarkable passage in the

Hebrew Bible of God walking through the garden in the cool of the evening. What a remarkable verse that is. The very time when the sun was going down and it was getting cooler, God takes a stroll in the garden. Adam and Eve are hiding away and they are banished from their first home in a garden. Perhaps much of human longing and the human story and love of gardens is about returning home. Is it about trying to find our way back into paradise, into the garden? Is that why gardens create enthusiasm in our minds? It's interesting to note that for Muslims, in the Koran, future promise is about returning to a garden paradise. In some of the interfaith work that I've done in Dudley it's been really intriguing talking to Muslim colleagues about gardens, of paradise lost that one day will be regained; our gardens as a place of innocence, of paradise, of inheritance.

We find also, as we move into the new Testament, the story of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Interestingly the Gospel writers never say the Garden of Gethsemane; one calls it a garden and another Gethsemane. Gethsemane means the place of the olive press, where olives were squeezed and pressed to make the rich virgin olive oil. It's powerful on so many levels, of being the place where Jesus was pressed, where the pressure started to mount up on him, where his tortured prayer comes to some kind of resolution. "My father if this cup cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." The garden of his betrayal, of his arrest. Jesus was taken from a garden just as Adam was taken out of Eden. But this time, Jesus, the main character, is walking away from himself for the sake of God, whereas Adam was walking away from God for the sake of himself.

As the story unfolds we find ourselves in the Garden of Resurrection. That garden where Joseph of Arimathea had Jesus buried in a new tomb cut into the rock and a stone rolled over it. On the third day, as women come to the tomb, as Mary Magdalen comes to the tomb, whichever of the resurrection narratives we explore, there's that sense of confusion and bewilderment in the garden. What has gone on here? What has happened in this garden? Mary in her daze bumps into this bloke who's in the garden and thinks he's the gardener. Isn't that wonderful? Thinks that amongst all this, horror, confusion and yet beauty, here is the gardener and she accuses him of being a body-snatcher! He names her and she realises who the gardener is. In the Garden of Eden man had met a woman in the garden, and here in the Garden of Resurrection a woman meets a man in the garden. The beginning has become the end and the end now has its beginning. If Eden had been a garden in which death waits, this garden of betrayal and death is one in which life awaits. The man whom Mary had bumped into was in every way the gardener, planting out the garden of paradise. It's the lush growth amidst dry soil, water flowing in the desert, and life in a hostile environment. In this Garden of Resurrection, Jesus the gentle gardener, has planted out a new paradise of renewed faith amidst a blood stained soil, a new hope that's going to flow out in the desert of empty emotions, that love has won through. That may be why we have developed the tradition in our churches of the flowering cross. Some churches take their Christmas tree, removing the branches to become the Good Friday cross and on Easter day transforming it with flowers. I've seen that beautifully done where each member of the congregation has been given a flower and added it onto some chicken wire which covers the cross. So on Easter day it becomes this beautiful cross.

Four different gardens as we encounter them in the Bible. I think we ourselves can encounter the emotions of those gardens when we spend a quiet day.

The Garden of Creation - observing creation around us, of knowing that in that garden everything didn't live out as being perfect and so recognising our own banishment, our own sinfulness and reflecting 'where are we today?'. Where, O Lord, have I gone wrong?

The Garden of Gethsemane - recognising that which pushes us down, that squeezes us in, praying for that which pushes the world down and squeezes the lost, the least and the lonely.

The Resurrection life in our own lives where God is doing a new thing for us, of listening to God's still small voice in that garden deep within us. What might be the hope and the renewal and the joy that God is leading us to?

Seeing also what John of Patmos was to dream and to write down, what has become the Book of Revelation, a dream of another garden, a new Jerusalem, a garden city filled with trees alongside a river, an arboreal landscape now set in a city, a vision of paradise restored. So on our quiet day in the garden what might our vision of hope look like? What might be the one or two small steps that you and I can make in our lives to build God's kingdom?

Eden, Gethsemene, a Garden of Resurrection, and a Garden in a city of a future dream - how might they speak to us today? What's going on spiritually within us when we seek to encounter God in our gardens? A few suggestions and things I've noticed in myself when I'm in my own garden or spending the day in a quiet garden somewhere. I think we *uncoil* ourselves, something about relaxing and opening ourselves whether that's sitting still or doing some physical work. We live in a quite coiled-up way, quite intense, dashing from one thing to the next, preparing one thing and another, having to make often very difficult decisions, rushing around, and my phone is going beep, beep in my pocket and I'm keeping on top of all those different emails that are coming in all the time. Life has an intensity about it. One of the greatest gifts those of you involved in this Trust give to others is letting them uncoil themselves and that takes time; moving from that clamour of noise, and the head space that's so filled, to be uncoiled enough to hear God.

I think gardening is *prayerful work*. Will anyone else admit, along with me, that you talk to yourself while you garden? I process all sorts of things going on and occasionally I speak out loud as well. You can be lost in thought but lost too in prayer. If you are having a difficult time with people, you can name weeds too! There's something about the *rhythm*, about the earth and earthworms and leaf matter running through your fingers and realising that you're made of the same stuff. We *belong to the earth*, humus from which we get humility and humble and human and humanity. I am of the earth – dust to dust and ashes to ashes. If you ever have any sense of self-importance, go and turn over your compost heap! We are earthy people and connecting with the soil of the earth does us good. I think we also recognise *our duty of stewardship* in a microcosm. Tending a window box, or a bigger garden, there's something about living out our Genesis calling to be stewards of God's good earth. Connecting us to the earth, growing food for ourselves and so connecting with those who daily have to grow their own food, who live with drought and flood and pestilence and disease. I'm struck that the average Anglican around the world is a young woman under the age of 30, growing her own food, living in extreme poverty, often in places of extreme violence or emerging from violence, and in a place adversely affected by climate change. Growing our own things has a sense of *solidarity* with the wider world, particularly when we can't get something to germinate, when cabbage white butterflies eat all our cabbages, or something else shrivels up and does nothing. It reminds us of our stewardship and our connection with the wider world.

It brings us up close to *creation*. The other day I was planting out some onions and a robin came and worked with me. That just makes my heart sing – a robin close by working the soil and you're working the soil and you come across some bug and you just flick it in the robin's direction. It is just such a joy, entering into a sense of the cycle of birth and death and resurrection life, deepening our appreciation and thanksgiving for God's riches. Gardening teaches us something

about *patience*, about what the fullness of time means, of how we patiently develop the soil, plant and water, seed and prune, and perhaps eventually harvest.

It's an activity of *healing*. The Quiet Garden here, I would suggest, is an integral part of the healing ministry of St George's Church. It allows tranquillity and peace and relaxation and joy and romance and wonder, all aspects of bringing healing in our broken world. For those people in our community who are deeply lonely, who have been broken, who are seeking after healing and wholeness, gardens can have a remarkable therapeutic effect on people. At Headley Court, the Ministry of Defence's rehabilitation centre, where particularly after Gulf War and war in Afghanistan, injured servicemen and women began to find much healing through the activities of horticulture that they do so well there. When I was a part-time chaplain in Northallerton prison, I well remember the pride that young offenders had in their small garden; a calm space in a harsh environment, where they could reflect and work and find some sort of healing. We underestimate the power of gardens to bring healing in people's lives. In this community, this garden, I'm sure can play its part in bringing healing.

So just a few areas where I think your task of the Quiet Garden Movement brings so much to people; of uncoiling ourselves, of being prayerful, of reminding us of our humanity and our need for stewardship, of bringing us up close to creation, of nurturing patience, of being places of healing. Why? Because I think gardens give us a taste of paradise, of opening a chink in the door back to Eden. "The world is charged with the grandeur of God. It will flame out like shining from shook foil." wrote Gerard Manley Hopkins. In the garden, as in so many other landscapes, we experience God in the sacrament of the present moment, of God self-revealing God's very self in our midst; and us being in such a place to recognise the God who is already present and with us, who is already here. St Paul writes of the fruit of the spirit being love, joy and peace and patience (you know the song), kindness, faithfulness, generosity, gentleness and self-control. In just a few weeks time we'll be celebrating all of that at Pentecost. I suggest that love, joy and peace and patience, kindness, faithfulness, generosity, gentleness and self-control are the flowers of Pentecost. They will blossom in the garden of our lives when we open ourselves to the presence of God already with us. So what sort of soil do you want to grow in? How do you want to be nurtured and cared for and how will you nurture and care for the flowers in God's kingdom? How will you protect from society's equivalent's of wind and disease and pests? How will you create a garden of delight, where there is just a door that is ajar that looks into the Garden of Eden? How will you weed and till and prune, all of which Jesus spoke about, so that you might bring home the harvest? I am not speaking to those who need to be converted to the fact that gardens are a place of encounter. Gardens are a place where we experience the God who loves us and cherishes us. God, the gardener of our lives, always enables us to go out and share, to dig and to turn the soil, plant seeds – in the hard ground, along the path and even amongst the thorns – planting the seeds and nurturing the territory of the church so that all may blossom.

May God the good gardener bless you and your Quiet Gardens as you seek to enable others to encounter him and may his seed continue to grow in yours and their lives so that all who come to delight in our gardens may bloom and flourish.

Bishop Graham Usher  
April 2018