

Easter Dawn Vigil 2019

St. Brandon's

Luke 24: 1-12

21st April 2019

If you are in London and can spare, or can create, half a day, then I would recommend that you take the tube to the southern end of the Northern line. The last station is Morden, and from there it's a short walk to Morden Hall Park, an oasis in bustling south London. Originally a private estate, the grounds were granted to the National Trust in 1941. Peaceful tree-lined riverside paths lead to wide open meadows. There is a 1920s rose garden and wetland boardwalks.

I actually don't know it particularly well in its present form, though I have visited since the National Trust 'commercialised' it and opened it to the public. I know it from way back, before it was opened to the public, because my paternal grandfather was for many years Head Gardener there, and he and Gran lived in a house on the estate called 'The Gardens'. So I have vivid childhood memories of getting on the Green Line bus (this was before we owned a car), and making the journey to visit them. What a place to explore, 125 acres, and with a white horse called Captain to visit! Unfortunately, my grandfather died too young of prostate cancer when I was about 7 or 8, so Gran had to move out of the tied house, and our visits there came to an end. But I do have one further memory of going with my dad and older brother to join in the planting of a tree in memory of my grandfather, and of being told by an onlooker, as I copied the person before me and forked in some soil around the base, 'Ah! You'll make a gardener one day'.

Unsurprisingly, my father and, I think encouraged by him, my mother were both keen and very good gardeners. I can still remember grandfather visiting our three bedroom semi with an exceptionally long back garden that we had moved into shortly after I was born, and talking with my dad about how the layout they had devised together was working out – a garden with beautiful borders and a lawn near the house (though this later had to double as a cricket pitch), an orchard with lavender hedges, and soft fruit, vegetables and a greenhouse beyond that.

By contrast, my role in our garden for the last 30 or so years has been to mow the lawn, cut the hedges and do the occasional bit of heavy lifting as required! Alison has always done the creative bits, and she's very good at it. But – and you can probably see where this is going – somehow the latent potential in me, to fulfil that prophecy and to become a gardener one day, needed to find expression! And so it was that a few weeks ago, with a bit more time available now, I suggested that I might at least take over the massive, large, well quite large south-facing border with pond. That meant persuading Alison and she was at first a little reluctant to hand it over. But fortunately her interests have focused recently on her patchwork and sewing, and other more sedentary activities, and coupled with the offer of being appointed to the position of Consultant Director (albeit unremunerated) she was finally persuaded. And this has so far involved comments like, 'Where are those pretty blue flowers I told you all about?', and other similar words of encouragement!

But more significantly, I had to wrest control from the couch grass and other weeds that had largely taken over the border. And just in case you're not familiar with couch grass, here is some as Exhibit A – notice the length of the root system. This has, in many cases, involved digging plants up, clearing the couch grass and other weeds from their roots and spreading compost, before replanting them. Sometimes, the angels' slightly chiding words from our Gospel reading have seemed to resonate: 'Why do you look for the living among the dead?' But I have made wonderful finds, such as the red Pasque flower (the Easter flower, *Pulsatilla vulgaris Rubra*, as you'll know!) which, set free, is now blooming fabulously.

So, this has involved getting rid of all that was, in effect, binding and choking the life out of the plants, and giving them room to breathe and thrive. But it has also, of course, opened out some space, so that I've been able to find room for some plants that we had in our courtyard and which had become rather pot-bound. And then there was still more space for some new plants. So we now have a Lavatera, a Daphne, a Ceanothus, an Azalea, Lupins and dotted in between lots of Petunia. (If you need any advice, just catch me over breakfast.) And although, I'm not *very* proud of my achievements so far, I did think you might like to see a picture of how it's looking – Exhibit B – which you can see better over breakfast.

But will it work? Have I got all the couch grass out? Almost certainly not. And it's too early to say whether the colour scheme and the mix of flowers will be somehow 'right'. At present, I have to live in the hope that this patch of garden will bring beauty and joy, that the latter glory of this patch may even be greater than its former glory (see Haggai 2:9) – though that will doubtless be a matter of subjective opinion!

Now that's an awfully long introduction to a sermon about the resurrection, but I hope you've already been able to see some parallels and where this might take us.

First, although Luke doesn't say so, John's gospel records, 'Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified' (19: 41). The women had come to the tomb where they expected to find Jesus' body, but the immediate context was a garden. And Mary, of course, in John's gospel supposed Jesus to be the gardener (20: 15), but was clearly ... mistaken? Ah no! Surely, John means us to catch the nuance here. Jesus was indeed the gardener, and through His death and resurrection, He has, definitively and for all time, wrested control from all that binds and chokes us and the whole created order, from all the couch grass with its deep, deep roots that threatens to overwhelm us and the whole created order. He has, through His death and resurrection, created space so that things which are now pot-bound and have no room to grow, may be set free to flourish. He has, through His death and resurrection, created space for new things to be planted, to find their place in the new order of things, to be things of beauty and joy. The old order has gone, control has been wrested from it through the power of God in raising our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead!

But, let me say something else. I used to find this Gospel reading a frustrating one because we never got to meet the risen Jesus. Oh, the women have some evidence – there is an empty tomb and no body to be found. And they are met by angels who tell them that, 'He is not here, but has risen'. But they, and we, at this point are left without the certainty of the presence of the risen Christ. Now the women, assuming they're among the 'companions' of the eleven disciples (Luke 24: 33) – they've rather disappeared into the background again by then – do meet the risen Christ that very night. But not by the end of our reading. And I've come to see the wisdom of stopping here. Because it helps us to ask a question about what they might have felt as they returned from the tomb, and that question leads us, I think, somewhere else that is helpful. Luke gives us no clue about what the women felt, but Matthew records that the women in his version, 'left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy' (28: 8), and Mark records that the women in his version, 'fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them' (16: 8). They have not yet met the risen Christ, they have not yet understood that control has been wrested, definitively and for all time, from all that binds and chokes. They have not yet seen the potential in the new created order. They have to live, at this point, with the fear, or perhaps the awe, and the potential – the amazement and the joy and therefore the hope – that Christ might just be alive. And they have to live with not being believed.

And I think for us, this may be precisely where we are, and indeed have to be. We have some evidence, we have been told, but we do not yet see that control has been wrested, definitively and for all time, from all that binds and chokes us and the whole created order. And so we are called to live, whether we are believed or not, in awe and amazement and joy; and in action in weeding and planting and tending God's creation; in the hope, but not yet the certainty, that the old order has gone; in anticipation, but not yet

knowing for sure, that control has been wrested from the old order through the power of God in raising our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead; and therefore in the great hope, but which has not yet been revealed, that the glory of the latter creation, in the new heaven and new earth if not before, will be even greater than its former glory.

Amen.