

GENESIS 2:4-17
TENDING THE GARDEN

Joe is working in his garden on a lovely summer evening. He's been working hard to tidy the garden up, to cut the grass, lift the weeds and water the plants in the greenhouse and it's all looking just so! The grass is beautifully green, the flowers are full of colour and the vegetable beds are beginning to produce some food for the house, there are no weeds to be seen. His friend comes past and stops for a chat as people do and Joe gets easily distracted and they spend an hour or so setting the world to rights! His friend is admiring Joe's garden and all his handiwork, it's neat and tidy, with lovely flowers and plants, and being slightly pious (in original story it was vicar!) his friend suggests that "isn't it wonderful what God can do in the garden!" Joe is slightly miffed at this, at the suggestion that somehow his neat and tidy garden is all God's doing, so he replies "You should have seen it when God had it all to Himself!"

Our place in the world and our relationship to God begins with the story of a garden. Eden means 'delight' and this garden is a place of delight, a place that forever describes our relationship to the world in which we live and our relationship to the God who created us and our world. What kind of story is this? Some would suggest that this story is a 'myth', created out of nothing to make a point; or a saga that has something of same origin. But there's more to it than that, as far as I can tell. I've always thought there's a touch of history about this story, that Adam has to be a real person. Yet, this is not history as we know it: the place of Eden in the world is described in relation to 4 rivers; archaeology will tell us that some of the earliest development of human beings is along the fertile crescent in Middle East round the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, which is where Genesis 2 places Eden. So we have a story "rooted within our space and time". (Atkinson)

Genesis 1 is written in the praise of God as the Creator of everything. The man of faith looks at the world in which he lives and acknowledges that this world is God's, He made the world and everything in it and it is His; human beings are the crown of creation, part of whole universe that God has made, but somehow distinct and different. People are made bearing the image of God, with the capacity to love and be loved, to make moral choices, to live in relationship with God. So we look at the world around us and at ourselves with a sense of awe and wonder – God has made all of this; we see the power and glory of God in the universe that He has made and in us, uniquely and wonderfully made. God is at the centre of Genesis 1: "*in the...*" (1:1) and the whole chapter is written with God at the centre; He is the creator and glory and praise belong to Him.

In Genesis 2, the focus shifts from God to us. "Man is now the pivot of the story" (Kidner p.58) God is not pushed out, but the focus is now on us, on Adam and on his relationship with God and with the world that God has made. The big theme of Genesis 2 is of God and Adam working together, of a partnership, a relationship in which each has a part to play, just as in the garden story with which I started. There are three things that open up that sense of partnership to us: God breathes life into Adam; Adam is given a job to do; there are boundaries for Adam. "The focus of attention is on the human being on God's earth. Where do we belong and how should we live in God's world?" (Atkinson p55) We like to be the centre of attention; it is an attractive thought perhaps to think that we are the pivot of the story, but we are only the centre of attention as we relate to God who made us and the world in which he has given us life.

1. God breathes life into Adam – “*when the...*” (2:4,7) The whole point of these verses is this – God made Adam a living, breathing human being. The way in which the process is described reminds us that we are part of the world, part of the rest of creation, somehow at one with the world around us and to share its life. The picture we have of God is a bit like the potter, shaping the clay into the right shape and working till he has got it right and then standing back satisfied with his piece of work. The only difference now is that God is not making an inanimate pot, but then goes on to breathe life into His creation and Adam becomes a living being. Here’s something important: Adam is a living being with a God-given body; so our bodies matter, and we need to look after them. There are two extremes that we tend towards and both are mistakes: we treat our bodies as the most important thing, we pamper them and want them to be just the right shape and everything we do is designed to make our bodies that right shape; or on the other hand, we hate our bodies, and just loathe the way we look and so we loathe ourselves. Somewhere in between is the balance: our bodies are God-given and we need to look after them as best we can! Adam became a living being, shaped and created by God.

2. Adam is given a job to do – he is the park keeper, the estate manager. “*Now the...*” (2:8,14) it’s almost as if God created Eden as a place for Adam to live and having given Eden to Adam, God then gives him the job of looking after it. He is to cultivate the garden, look after it, protect it, and use its resources for his own benefit. Adam is given both freedom and responsibility: he is given the freedom to live in the garden as he wishes; it is somehow his; but he is also given the responsibility to look after Eden on God’s behalf; God is the owner, Adam the estate manager. Work is part and parcel of this garden, something to enjoy, the way through which Adam can be creative and fulfilled; work is part of our human creative instinct, something to value, the way by which we serve God in the world.

How do we understand our relationship to the planet we live on? This is an enormously important question for us today. Climate Change, whether you agree with it or not, is a huge political and environmental issue and much of that is about way we relate to the planet. Our carbon footprint, the hole in the ozone layer, oil pollution off the coast of the USA, do we develop more nuclear power plants? All of these are issues that centre on our relationship to the planet on which we live. The same mix of Eden’s freedom and responsibility come into play when we try to shape attitudes that are Christian and God-given: we have the freedom to use and develop the planet’s resources for our benefit and well-being and as creative beings bearing God’s image, we have found lots of ways in which we can do that; human ingenuity and creativity have found some marvellous ways of making use of the planet’s resources. But we also have a responsibility to look after the planet and so often in the rush to exploit its wealth, we have forgotten to be responsible and climate change, pollution etc are examples of the ways in which that responsibility is coming back to bite us.

The future of the planet is bound up with us; I mean that in two ways. First of all and most obviously, the choices we make about our lifestyle and so on will affect the planet; that has gone on in the past and is still going on; so the planet’s future is tied up with our making good choices, responsible choices. But there is a second way in which the future of the planet is tied up with our future and we see that in Romans 8, where Paul talks about creation in all kinds of ways: “*subjected to frustration*” “*in bondage to decay*” “*groaning as in pains of childbirth*” as if the whole planet is feeling the effects of our poor choices and our lack of responsibility. Its release and redemption are clearly connected with what God has promised to us: “*the creation...*” (Rom 8:19, 21b) The freedom, glory, and fulfilment of all of creation is tied to our

glory as the children of God; when we are glorified, the whole of creation will be glorified with us. We have to look after the garden!

3. There are boundaries – Freedom is a great thing; for us to be the centre of everything is a great thing, a glorious place to be; it feeds our pride and vanity and sense of self-importance, to be centre-stage on planet earth. But for Adam there were boundaries: “*you are...*” (2:16f) Let’s be clear: there is nothing magical about this tree; the tree has no special power; there is nothing about the fruit of that tree that will do anything, it is not poisonous. A tree stands in centre of garden; it might well have been one tree that carried two qualities with it, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; the tree stands as a test for Adam, there are boundaries and this one tree is out of bounds. It is out of bounds because God put it there and it is for Adam’s good that it is out of bounds. Adam will continue to enjoy the perfect life of delight in Eden and the perfect life in relationship with God as long as he stays within the boundaries; as soon as he goes beyond them, that perfect life will come to an end and a whole lot of other factors, harmful things, spoiling things, come into play and life is never the same again.

We live in a society where boundaries are not popular. Our society has almost, not quite but almost, thrown off the boundaries. We are certainly losing the notion of right and wrong, of good and bad, to be replaced by much more fuzzy notions of ‘it works for me!’ and so we try to become masters of our own destiny; we make up our own boundaries. We then have different sets of boundaries and your boundaries become different from mine and you can’t tell me that mine are worse than yours or that I need to adopt your boundaries in order to get life right! Yet, even those who claim to have no boundaries – Francis Schaeffer told the story of debating with someone in the 1970’s who claimed that anything goes and love should be free. Schaeffer then asked the man for his girlfriend’s phone number, but the man refused; even he had boundaries! What is clear from Genesis 2 is that God sets boundaries for us as people; there are things which, in God’s mind, are right and things which are wrong and Adam was set the test of listening to and obeying God and staying within God-given boundaries of acceptable behaviour. Boundaries are for our good: they are part of the way God has made world, part of God’s good pattern for the world; we can’t kick off these boundaries; Adam tried it and in 2 weeks time we’ll see where it got him!

Eden, a delight, a garden out of which flowed life-giving streams of water. It was the place God made for Adam, for the man to enjoy and to look after; the place in which he is free and the place for which he is responsible. Adam is not God, so there are boundaries, he can go so far and no further! This is our story too: God gives us life; we are free to enjoy the planet on which we live and can use and develop the planet and its resources as we are able; but we are also responsible to God for our work, there are boundaries beyond which we should not go. There are lots of examples of people who have exploited the planet for their own benefit and wealth, but have forgotten to be responsible; we have pushed the boundaries because we think we know better than God. Let’s enjoy the planet; it’s a wonderful place. Let’s be responsible in the way that we live on the planet, to make good choices, choices that are good for the environment. In every area of life there are God-given boundaries: we must learn live with in these boundaries and give glory to God.