

-1 The Tree of Life

SSF Sunday 7th
July 2002

If you are glancing at a book in a book shop, do you glance at the beginning and then, cheatingly, at the end, to try and get a quick idea of the contents? This might be seen as an attempt to do this with the Bible; only at the very beginning and end does the Tree of Life appear. It is a common concept to many cultures, and comes in many guises - the tree of life that provides fruit, the tree of life symbolising an individual life, Ystragyl the world tree in Norse mythology, even to the modern scientist the tree of life as a diagrammatic representation of the evolution and development of life. But I want to tell a story starting and ending with the Tree of Life. It is a story that can be taken at two levels, the story of all mankind throughout history, and the story of each individual, personal to each of us. Remember that Adam, who the story is about, is Hebrew for 'all men'. If you start debating with yourself whether Adam was a historical character or not you are going off the point; it is not an argument I want to get into.

So to the beginning. The first appearance of the Tree of Life. In the garden of Eden, a beautiful garden and a place of springs with four rivers flowing away from it. There are two trees growing there...one the tree of life, one the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Presumably Adam may eat from the tree of life if he wants - the only prohibition is on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Then you know the story; Adam loses a rib and gains a wife, then a thin slithery stranger intrudes upon their bliss. They eat the forbidden fruit - good for food, pleasing to the eye, and desirable for gaining wisdom. They gain wisdom, that they are naked; frantic sewing of fig leaves, then they hide when God walks in the garden 'in the cool of the day'. Adam blames Eve, Eve blames the snake, but they are out. God says 'The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live for ever' (here is an interesting thought - Adam may have eaten from it already - he did live to be 930 - but that is not for ever. You have to keep eating from it; once is not enough) So God places on the east side of the garden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.

Now, the big jump, we flick to the other end, the last chapter of all. A lot has happened. The end is not a garden, but a city. (Read Rev 22 1-5).

So there are our two points for the journey of mankind, the garden at the beginning, the city at the end. At the beginning the tree of life was there in the garden, but there is no way back to it, the cherubim and the flaming sword see to that- at the end the tree of life will be there in the city, with fruit every month - and the leaves give healing as well.

I think in some ways this story is written into each of us. It is a well-known biological phenomenon that some life forms, when infant, resemble earlier types of the species, back down the evolutionary tree. Children are little monkeys etc.... I think we each carry the spiritual history of mankind within us; we can all half-remember the garden, the innocence, the back-in-the-beginning. For some of us the Fall is a dramatic moment - we do wrong and we realise it, but cannot undo it, or forget the realisation. For some it just happens, maybe we wake up in the morning with a slight headache and a blurred memory.... But we all find ourselves on a road, out of Eden, heading somewhere, just as mankind is.

The road is often uncomfortable, and often dangerous. There is always a choice -to go on or

turn back. To turn back is natural, back towards the personal Eden we dimly remember. People do it in all sorts of ways., Some are obvious. This is summer, the season of festivals - most famous of all was Woodstock, do you remember the Joni Mitchell song ' we are stardust we are golden, and we got to get ourselves back to the garden - we are caught in the devil's bargain, and we got to get ourselves back to the garden'. Pretty unequivocal. I saw two gloriously contrasting versions of this whilst on holiday in Canada, on the beautiful wooded headland wher the University of British Columbia stands. One was the Nitobe Memorial Garden, allegedly the best Japanese formal garden outside Japan. Immaculate lawns, cherry blossom, lakes, stone lanterns with elaborate names, the 44-plank bridge...all laid out to the exact geometry of Japanese landscape gardening, peopled by the quiet, respectful and well-dressed, sitting on wooden benches to meditate or walking quietly around. The contrast was a mere hundred yards away, just on the other side of the dual carriageway that runs round the headland; native forest and a signposted 'clothing optional' beach where, not only on the beach but struggling up and down the distinctly rough trails thought spiky vegetation and fallen trees one meets refugees from Woodstock, mostly middle-aged men, wearing no more than baseball caps, boots and haversacks... some smoking what I took to be illegal substances. Both seeking nature and Eden, one in informal rebellion against convention, one formalising and setting it within a very traditional convention.

There is a problem with back however, and that is **you never get there**. Remember the cherubim and the flaming sword. They are still there. The garden was solitary (or at least with one partner; really solitary was never that much fun); it was great at the time. But mankind can no longer be solitary, recreating the garden as your sole place of life is selfish, it's too easy, it's a cop out. And its not just something that happens out there in the world; of course it has its parallel inside the church. There is a beautiful old hymn 'Oh come will you go the Eden above'; classic 19th-century nonconformist imagery I was brought up with - 'in that blessed land neither sighing or anguish can breathe in the field where the glorified rove, oh ye sin-burdened ones who in misery languish, oh say will you go to the Eden above'. Wonderful but slightly unsound. Roving in fields is lovely, but it is not what Revelation talks about. The danger is to concentrate on your own spiritual experience, get personal blessings, God is all you need, just you and Him, but there is no such thing as an individual Christian (says Eileen)... I'm sorry, you're going to have to put up with me, and I am going to have to put up with you. It's going to last a while. Get that in your heads - let's get started now.

So why is there no way back, There is a sign by the road, in a red triangle. EDEN SHUT. WARNING CHERUBIM AND FLAMING SWORD AHEAD'. follow diversion signs.. There is something better God has planned, and that is up ahead. The city. Well, to be precise, two possible cities. Revelation describes two. As well as the celestial city there is its counterpart, Babylon the Great, aka the Great Whore. To John who wrote the book it was Rome he had in mind, but there have been lots more since. Any earthly power system that sets itself up without reference to God becomes Babylon. Some approach the full Babylonian horror of the Book of Revelation - think of the Nazis, maybe Communist Russia ; more often earthly cities are a bit like a screen on which two projectors are casting an image at the same time. Because man is made in the image of God, and still has the ghost of God within him, like it or not, the image of the celestial city and its values is there; so also is the image of Babylon - the oppression, the materialism, the abuse of man by man. You are forever getting glimpses of both. In Victoria I came across a wreath-laying ceremony at a war memorial - looked closer, and the military band was Japanese; it was the Japanese navy laying their wreath. Would they have got away with that here? Or would the Sun have called out for war veterans in flaming wheelchairs to mount Kamikaze attacks if they tried to? I thought of the Tree of Life in the Celestial city, 'whose leaves are for the healing of the nations'. Glimpses, you only get glimpses. People have of course tried consciously to replicate the celestial city -

monasteries with their cloisters - but you could of course argue that is a retreat from all the mess of the world, a disguised way of trying to recreate Eden, the place we have been rather than the place to which we are going. Our attempts to build the city, however well intentioned, are at best second rate, or a hundred-and-second rate. At any rate, it is not for all of us.

So what goes wrong, why are there two cities at the end of the road, two possible destinations, the good and the bad. This is where you need to read the rest of the book to find out. Because from Eden we have carried with us the fatal flaw, the thing that went wrong then, the fact that man insists he knows how to do things his own way. He knows there has to be organisation, there has to be society, people have to interact, to be together - but he thinks he knows how to do it, he defines good and evil without reference to God. He knows how to pull the strings for his own benefit, knows how to set up the system. And no system ever works; the strong always end up abusing the weak. The Romans had lots of unpleasant things they could do to you - St John the Divine, who wrote Revelation, got away pretty lightly simply being exiled to Patmos with his laptop. Folk start off with a glimpse of the Celestial City in their sights, but left to themselves always end up in Babylon - it's a bit like a cosmic game of snakes and ladders. Remember snakes and ladders? The happy children on their way to the seaside get to 99 - and its back down the snake all the way to 3, in hospital with bandages round their heads after the train crashes as it arrives at Whitley Bay.

This is where God intervened, and intervenes. By stepping into history himself, and confronting the fatal flaw. This is the Gospel - Jesus facing it all, the horror, the evil, the dark side. Meeting death, face to face; ending up dying horribly, hung on a tree in a way that the religious establishment said made him accursed. Only by this are we stopped in our tracks, only by this are we set on the road to the destination God intended. Only by this is the original curse of the Fall undone, the original sin of Adam (whatever words you want to use) the long years of separation ended, **God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself**. There is no such thing as an individual Christian, there is no such thing as a Christian without an individual a meeting Christ. Whether you meet him in solemn contemplation, or in the mass, or in falling on the floor and speaking in tongues, on the Damascus road or quietly in your own back yard, that is irrelevant.

The city is still a long way off, and we don't know what bridges we have to cross to get there. But we are on our way - and it is not just then, it is now. But the impossibility has become the possibility; we have the beginnings of the city here among us now, the glimmerings, the first fruits - to an industrialised society, the pilot plant, quietly producing the new product. And the vision is a bit clearer - not only do we have the guidebook and the description, but we know someone there....he has booked us rooms. In my Father's house are many mansions..

I started off with a popular song. You find prophecy in strange places. It dawned on me recently that the best - and a thoroughly Biblical - description of Heaven is found in a song that starts off by asking us to imagine that there is no such place.... imagine no countries, imagine no possessions, imagine no religion - that's fine. All the things that divide, that cause every human organisation to eventually crack and fissure and splinter are gone (to quote John Lennon again, Happy Christmas, War is over) Back to St John the Divine. He specifically says there was no temple in the city, there will be no need for religious observance, God is there himself. The things that divide have all gone. We are eating the fruit of the Tree of Life, all the year round; but as well as the fruit, its leaves are for the healing of the nations. So will the different nations be there? It's a tantalising hint. God must take delight in diversity, he created it. Heaven will not be boring. In Vancouver I saw streets which offered at least a

dozen different nationalities of restaurant Indian, Cantonese, Malay, Afghan, Thai...; perhaps it will be like that! And we will have redeemed constitutions, fit to cope with the hottest curry....