

Sermon All Saints Day 2021

In 1911 the popular children's book, 'The Secret Garden' was first published. It has remained a favourite since. And not only in book form. It has received four film adaptations. Six TV serials have been made. There have been a couple of play adaptations, a stage musical and an opera! The story simply tells of 10-year-old orphan girl Mary, sent to live with her remote uncle in a large, foreboding country house. Soon after her arrival, Mary learns about a secret garden on the estate that has been locked away for 10 years. She becomes enchanted with the idea of a secret garden. She hunts for it, and eventually finds it and goes inside. It appears to be abandoned, but she finds a few sprigs of new growth and begins tending to them even though she knows nothing about gardening. Mary befriends a gardener on the estate, as well as the brother of her housemaid, and together they help Mary tend the garden.

While the young Mary works on her new garden, the house itself has its secrets. After hearing cries in the night, Mary's also discovers her sickly and demanding cousin, Colin, who remains secluded in his room and is not expected to live long. Mary tells Colin about the secret garden, and he becomes determined to see it for himself. A plot is hatched to bring him there in his wheelchair. And just as Mary has grown physically and mentally healthier by spending time in the garden, Colin also begins to transform when he enters it. The sickly boy now declares that he will now live forever.

As spring comes, the garden begins to thrive along with the health of the cousins. Soon, Colin is able to stand and walk. The boy keeps this a secret because he wants to surprise his father when he returns from his travels, hoping that his improved health will enable his father to love him. When the father returns to the house, he is surprised to find that the garden has been discovered and is thriving again, and that his neglected son has now been made strong and healthy. In short, the story is a parable of how a place of near-destruction and neglect can also be the place of healing and regeneration.

Not everyone here will be aware we have our own 'secret garden' at All Saints! Behind the high wooden paling fence of the 'old vicarage' is a large block that was once simply the back yard of the old vicarage. There used to be a wash house there, but that was demolished a few years ago after falling into serious disrepair. There would have been a washing line and some sort of garden to service Fr Gregory and the vicarage household in the 19th century. But for several decades now the block has been not much more than a wasteland, and slashed a couple times a year to keep it under control.

Until a couple months ago, when a parishioner asked to harvest some weeds growing there for their own cooking. Then came a request to clear a small plot to grow a few veges. (Just one square metre I was told!). But through the hard work of just a couple of people, and the kind support of several others, half the land is now cleared. And some 70-odd food types are growing! This past week the first strawberries were picked. After mass ask Lilly to show you around....

Of course, in the religious imagination of countless peoples, the 'Garden' has been a key image not only for Paradise and heavenly reward, but also of the spiritual life in general. Eden remains for us an archetypal image of both our state of original blessedness, of the God who walks in perfect harmony amongst his creation, but also of what has been lost. The parables of Our Lord are full of agricultural references. And it is in the garden that Our Lord after his crucifixion is laid to rest, the seed laid in the earth, and so becoming a sign of hope of the rebirth of all creation. The image is completed when on the Easter morning, Mary Magdalene recognises (not mistakes!) our Lord as the gardener. In his resurrection he brings to life a new creation.

On this feast of All Saints, the feast of those who now share in glory *the fruits* of the new creation, we should understand that saints aren't born; rather, they're made. We are all born with the potential to become saints. The only difference between those who aren't saints and those who are, is the difference between people who allow the life of grace to grow within, those who nurture the fruits of the spirit, those who permit Christ to prune the dead, diseased and damaged parts of our souls, and those who don't.

In in the expansive and inclusive vision of John the Divine in the book of Revelation, we hear, "*I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!'*" In the garden of God's paradise let every flower bloom! But the vision is important because it shows that God is glorified, in *the assembly* of the saints. It is the *shared witness* of this communion that counts. A shrivelled, solitary pot plant on a sun-baked balcony is not a garden. Nor is an individual struggling to make their own way to God going to make much progress in sanctity. And this reminds us that one of the key purposes of the Church is to make saints.

We exist – the church exists – as a school for saints. To use our image today, we might say, we exist as *a garden for saints*. And so, the characteristics of the saints are the characteristics of the Church. In the Creed we confess belief in the “One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.” These words which define the Church, also define the saints. They become, if you like, the wall of our saint-making garden. Contained within these four walls is where the work of God will be most fruitful, most abundant.

The saints are One because they are together. We speak of the communion of the saints. The Collect for today further reminds us that we part of a fellowship, the mystical body of Christ. The saints are One, and are united with one another, because they are united with Christ. ***The saints are also obviously holy***. The word “saint” (from “sanctus”) means holy. They’ve been made holy by Christ, through the sacraments, through prayer, through grasping hold of and using God’s grace daily, through cooperating with God’s Grace. ***The saints are also Catholic***, that is, “universal.” In other words, their holiness is the same in all places and at all times. We commemorate all the saints of all countries and of all centuries and of all backgrounds, just as in John’s vision. We recall saints of all ages, of all nationalities, men, women and children, the poor and the rich, the old and the young, the healthy and the sick, all confessing the same Faith. ***And the saints are Apostolic***. They share in the same Faith and Tradition that Christ gave to the Apostles. They shared this Faith with the world through their words and in their lives. And just as the apostles were sent, so the saints realized that their holiness wasn’t just for themselves but for everyone.

On this our patronal festival, we ask the prayers of the saints. We ask that through their intercession *we* might be made saints, to have our place with them in the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic people of God. We ask that we too might grow in grace, that we too bear abundant fruit.

St Teresa of Avila, the towering spiritual figure of 16th century Spain, knew the hard work of this. But she also realised the blessings that come when we take the plunge and endeavour to cultivate the soul for God. She writes, *‘Beginners must realize that in order to give delight to the Lord they are starting to cultivate a garden on very barren soil, full of abominable weeds. His Majesty pulls up the weeds and plants good seed... With the help of God we must strive like good gardeners to get these plants to grow and take pains to water them so that they don’t wither but come to bud and flower and give forth a most pleasant fragrance to provide refreshment for this Lord*

of ours. Then He will often come to take delight in this garden and find His joy among these virtues.

What an incredibly beautiful image this is, of the God who takes delight in the garden of our souls! This is surely who the saints are: those who allowed God to take his role, his place, as gardener. It is the great truth of our faith, that to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic, to sprout forth the life and goodness that God desires for us, then we must *allow the Lord Jesus to walk alongside us*. A thing that is neglected withers and dies, but when it is nurtured and cared for, it thrives. To join that *great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb* we simply have to allow Jesus to nurture and tend our souls. Amen.