

Christ Church, Georgetown
Sermon, Sunday, December 11, 2016, Third Sunday of Advent
The Rev. Timothy Cole, Rector

I had good friend at University in Aberdeen who was a staunch West Coast of Scotland Presbyterian. Admittedly, his churchmanship largely consisted of his allegiance to a protestant football team rather than actually going to church much, but this did not stop him being deeply suspicious of my Episcopalianism. You have to understand that there are still the remnants of a fairly unreconstructed fear of Roman Catholicism in the West of Scotland and my friend may not have gone much to church, but he was very clear about which church he would never go to!! He used to say that I belonged to "The Church of Paris". This was because (from a Scottish perspective at least) Paris is, as he said, "half way to Rome!!" Well, life has a way of taking revenge on us all and my friend did then meet, fall in love with and marry a lovely and devout Roman Catholic girl not long after!

Well, I think we Episcopalians are, and ought to be, very proud of our 'Parisienne' position, our 'via media', our middle way. The middle ground is not easy ground to stand on at times but it is ground to which all have access, from whichever side they come from.

Advent, however, doesn't seem to have much concern for the middle ground does it? It is all about beginnings and endings, first comings and last comings. The middle seems in the background somewhat.

One of the surprising things I discovered in the time I spent in Afghanistan as the senior British chaplain there concerned the Afghan Special Forces our troops were helping to train. The Afghan Commander of their Special Forces was a charismatic figure and, amongst other things, he made one rather striking and perhaps surprising command decision. He gave each of his men a small piece of fertile ground and ordered them (ordered them mind you) to each make their own small garden.

Now, that may seem like a strange thing to get a lot of special forces soldiers to do in between some fairly bloody operations, and I think people thought it was. Yet in Afghanistan, it was less surprising that it might be here. In a country where water can be very scarce, the luxury of a garden is a very precious thing. And even the toughest or wealthiest man might well spend time making and tending a small garden there. The words of Isaiah in our first lesson make perfect sense in a context like that. "For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water."

The Afghan special forces commander was wise on two counts. First the garden was a reward. Only the lucky could afford the luxury of having one and it made his soldiers feel special in a human, rather than in a simply military sense.

More importantly, it was a clever move in that it focused their minds on what they were ultimately fighting to achieve. Not just a garden in the desert for themselves, a place to find peace between the storms of violence, but also a garden in the desert for their broken country and for all their people. Here was a real symbol, something real and of value in itself but one that also pointed to a greater meaning. The garden focused their minds on what they were trying to achieve by risking their lives day in and day out. To make a garden once more out of a burnt and shattered country.

In Advent, the Scriptures move us to reflect on the end time when Jesus will come again. A time when everything will be put right. When "the eyes of the blind shall be opened and ears of the deaf unstopped; when the lame shall leap like a deer and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy."

Two Sundays ago we reflected a little bit on judgment and the Last Judgment of ourselves. But here we see Isaiah talking about the judgment, not in terms of us being judged, but rather in terms of God coming to judge in our favor. "He will come with a vengeance with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." Here, God's power, and terrible power it is, is rushing to right the wrongs done to us and not to sweep us away for the wrongs we have done.

And yet, as we ponder these great moments of beginnings and endings in Advent, the soldiers' gardens remind us, I think, that there are in fact, three comings of Christ. There is the first when he came in the flesh at the first Christmas. There is the last when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead. But there is a third coming. A coming between those first and last.

As a Bernard, 12th century Abbot of Clairvaux says, it is a hidden coming. "In the first, Christ was our redemption; in the last, he will appear as our life: in this middle coming, he is our rest and consolation." "As the Lord himself says: if anyone loves me, they will keep my word, and my father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them."

To make a small garden in the desert is not a trivial act. It is a sign of hope. It is an act of faith that, one day, the desert will be conquered and the garden will cover it. In the mean time it is a place where we can find rest and consolation in the midst of whatever arid hardship or suffering that surrounds us. I can well imagine those soldiers coming back from a grueling operation, with many horrors behind them, and stepping into their little piece of green living reality and tending the flowers and the water ways that make them grow.

The same is true for us isn't it? Here, in the Advent of our days, the days between the first and last coming of the Lord, the days between our own coming and our own going, we do well to make small gardens where we can. Gardens in our lives and relationships and gardens in our hearts and souls. We will not conquer all the desert now, but we can shape a small piece of what we hope and pray will be in the end.

Christ Church is such a garden. A place where there is the fresh water of life and where the flowers of kindness and friendship and service grow up around the ordinary prayers of we, who gather here week by week.

Our families are also such when we can make them so. When we tend and nurture the time and the shared life we have together. How often we fail to tend these gardens as we should. And yet the flowers of love are remarkably robust and survive on little enough water at times.

Our hearts can also be so, where we make space for them to be at rest. When we listen for God's word and let it take root and grow in the dark soil that we can only find in ourselves when we step away from the battles of work and life long enough to do so. A small group of people were doing just that here last Sunday at the Advent Quiet Morning here at the Church. Every day, the small group that gather to say the morning, noonday and evening offices in the chapel are doing the same.

Last week, in the Church Calendar, we remembered Deacon Nicholas Ferrar who founded the informal Christian community at Little Gidding in 1626. He did so after losing much of his money in the bad days of the London Virginia Company. America wasn't always the safe bet and land of opportunity it was to become! The community was just his extended family and there were no religious vows taken. They just determined to live a Godly life according to the practice of the Prayer Book. It was to Ferrar that the metaphysical poet George Herbert sent his book of poetry 'The Temple' and it was Ferrar that published it after Herbert's death. We would never have had Herbert's great poetry were it not for Ferrar.

Little Gidding was just such a small garden in the desert where that handful of people determined to make a small piece of good and living green in a spiritually barren and dry land. Ferrar's household always had someone at prayer and had a strict routine. They tended to the health and education of local children. Ferrar and his family produced harmonies of the gospels that survive today as some of the finest in Britain. Many of the family also learned the art of bookbinding. There was nothing grand, nothing world changing in any of this but there was something of quiet spiritual power nonetheless.

300 years later it was the memory of that unremarkable oasis and the spiritual mark it left on the landscape that TS Eliot famously recognized in his poem by the same name.

If you came this way,
Taking any route, starting from anywhere,
At any time or at any season,
It would always be the same: you would have to put off
Sense and notion. You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid.

Here, the intersection of the timeless moment
Is England and nowhere. Never and always.

This Advent then, let us think of where we might make a garden of sorts in the wilderness of our lives and our world. A garden where the bright flowers of service and kindness and acceptance of our differences might bloom. A place where God's word might have the chance to take root and grow in us so that he and the Father might be able to make a home here with us. A place for the middle coming of Christ, where, bloody and traumatized by the struggles of our lives, we may come and find in him our rest and consolation.

Perhaps we, as the 'Church of Paris', the via media, those who desire to hold the middle way, should think of ourselves as such a garden which all may have access, to which all can be drawn and to which Christ may come and make his home.

