

IT IS YOUR GARDEN NOW

Sunday of the Passion – Cycle B: Mark 15:1-39

There is a wonderful moment in Oscar Wilde's children's story *The Selfish Giant*, when the giant who, for most of the story will not share his beautiful garden with the neighbourhood children, has what we might call a change of heart. The giant's selfishness has an effect on the garden, the reader observes, but the giant must discover the connection. Without children playing in it, it is always winter in the garden, never spring, summer, or autumn, regardless of the changing seasons beyond the garden wall. One morning the giant awakes to the sound of birds singing, children playing, and the sweet fragrance of flowers wafting through his bedroom window. He looks out onto his garden, and sees that it is filled with children running and playing and climbing the many beautiful trees. The neighbourhood children have found a hole in the wall, and their breaking through the giant's selfishness, so to speak, has driven out the perpetual winter. Only in one corner the giant sees that it is still winter. There he sees a little boy who cannot play in the trees with the other children in the giant's garden because he is too tiny. Oscar Wilde tells us that the giant's heart melts as he looks out onto the garden and sees the little boy crying bitterly as he wanders all around a tree he wants to climb.

In a blink, we hear the giant say to himself, "I will put that poor little boy on the top of the tree, and then I will knock down the wall, and my garden shall be the children's playground for ever and ever."

Wilde finishes the scene by telling us that the giant "crept downstairs and opened the front door quite softly, and went out into the garden. But when the children saw him they were so frightened that they all ran away, and the garden became winter again. Only the little boy did not run, for his eyes were so full of tears that he did not see the giant coming. And the giant stole up behind him and took him gently in his hand, and put him up into the tree. And the tree broke at once into blossom, and the birds came and sang on it, and the little boy stretched out his two arms and flung them round the Giant's neck, and kissed him. And the other children, when they saw that the Giant was not wicked any longer, came running back, and with them came the Spring. 'It is your garden now, little children,' said the Giant, and he took a great axe and knocked down the wall. And when the people were going to market at twelve o'clock they found the Giant playing with the children in the most beautiful garden they had ever seen."

There is more to this story. Later we learn that the little boy for whom the giant had had such compassion was, in fact, the Christ Child. "One winter morning," Wilde writes, the giant looked out of his window as he was dressing. He did not hate the winter now, for he knew that it was merely the spring asleep, and that the flowers were resting.

Suddenly he rubbed his eyes in wonder, and looked and looked. It certainly was a marvellous sight. In the farthest corner of the garden was a tree quite covered with lovely white blossoms. Its branches were all golden, and silver fruit hung down from them, and underneath it stood the little boy he had loved."

"Downstairs ran the Giant in great joy, and out into the garden. He hastened across the grass, and came near to the child. And when he came quite close his face grew red with anger, and he said, 'Who hath dared to wound thee?' For on the palms of the child's hands were the prints of two nails, and the prints of two nails were on the little feet.

'Who hath dared to wound thee?' cried the giant; 'tell me, that I may take my big sword and slay him.'

'Nay!' answered the child; 'but these are the wounds of Love.'"

In literature, the garden is often a metaphor, and Oscar Wilde's garden in *The Selfish Giant* is no exception. The giant's garden is his life, and the reader understands early in the story that his selfishness shuts out beauty, joy, and love. In the Bible, the Garden of Eden is a metaphor for heaven on earth. It is a place of perfect harmony, balance, and eternal life; but we soon learn that this is not the home we make for ourselves. Human nature, sin, the Bible calls it, leads us to create a garden quite unlike heaven. In Jerzy Kosinski's book *Being There*, the main character, a gentle simpleton named Chance, has never left his garden. It is his whole reality and, we see, even when he is forced to leave it, he remains there in his mind. For him, the garden is both a place of safety and the cause of his isolation from others. David Suzuki tells us that the human race lives in a garden, the garden of the natural world, and that we are inevitably and systematically destroying our own habitat, the garden which, if you think about it,

resembles Eden in Genesis: there is harmony, balance, and the cycle of life in the garden of the world. Jesus' resurrection, proclaimed in next Sunday's gospel, takes place in the Garden of the Sepulchre. In John's account, Mary mistakes Jesus for the gardener, and faith can do nothing but lead us to reflect on the appropriateness of Jesus' mistaken identity. Because he embodies the whole love, grace, and power of God, Jesus has the capacity to welcome people back to Eden; to open the door, so to speak, and show us the way in.

There is nothing resembling a beautiful garden in today's Gospel. Mark writes of Jesus' passion without comment: unlike Matthew's account, Jesus' suffering does not fulfill Hebrew prophecy; unlike John's telling, here Jesus is not the Lamb of God, taking away the sins of the world. The best we have in Mark is the Roman centurion's confession of faith in Jesus as the Son of God. The rest is gritty and hard.

But Kiraly Imre von Pescselyi saw that, even in this bare-bones account of Jesus' suffering and death there is a garden story present. In his hymn, discovered by the Welsh hymnologist Erik Routley in the mid-twentieth century, Pescselyi sees the human condition as God's garden; and at the heart of this garden, giving it life and health and strength is the Tree of Wisdom, Christ himself. Pescselyi sees through the grit and suffering and the horror of death by crucifixion to the love that moves Jesus to give himself over to the powers of sin and death that they might do their worst. Like Oscar Wilde's giant, Pescselyi understands Jesus' suffering and death as the "wounds of love" in which are born resurrection and new life. Love is stronger than sin and death, we learn through Christ's saving work.

As with Wilde's giant, Christ comes to us, calling us to himself through the love and compassion planted deep within each one of us. And once our heart has been changed by love, God's love revealed in the life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God's garden becomes our garden too – a garden of faith and understanding and wisdom, of mercy and forgiveness; a garden of blessing to be shared with all people.