

GARDENS OF LOVE

→ For some people, gardening is a very pleasant pastime. They potter amongst their flowers and plants and simply enjoy the moments they're able to spend there. For other people it's an absolute passion; something that occupies their every waking moment. If the weather is right, they're in the garden, planting, weeding, pruning and when the weather isn't good they're planning and scheming about what to grow next in their treasured spot.

.....And isn't that just what gardening is all about – growing things. Some things we grow just because they're beautiful and we're going to enjoy the look of them or the smell of them. Other things we grow because we want to eat them and enjoy the flavours and the textures. But whichever of those purposes we may have, gardening is all about growing.

.....This morning, we remembered that fruit is not only an important part of our diet in that we should be eating five portions of fruit and vegetables per day, but fruit is really important in our lives too. Fruit is a metaphor for our character in scripture. In Matthew 7 Jesus is recorded as having said that "The way to identify a tree or a person is by the kind of fruit that they produce" and this morning we also remembered that the fruit we are expected to produce is the fruit of the spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

.....Tonight, as we continue to celebrate and give thanks for the harvest, I want us to think about the first and perhaps foundational quality mentioned in that list of fruit – the quality of love. And we're going to do that by thinking about three gardens that we can read of in scripture and explore how love was in evidence in those places.

Garden of Eden

→The first of those gardens is the one we've just heard about from the very first book of God's word – the Garden of Eden as it was described in Genesis 2. This is a beautiful place, with all kinds of beautiful trees growing and producing good fruit. There in the centre of that garden God placed the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and in the middle of it all he placed Adam and then Eve. They were placed there to enjoy the beauty of God's creation, to tend it and care for it and through that experience to enjoy a relationship with God himself who had breathed life into them.

.....But a necessary factor in any loving relationship has to be free will. True love can't really exist unless a person is able to choose for themselves whether to love, because love isn't an emotion of a desire – love is a decision; love is selfless; love chooses to put the needs and desires of those that we love ahead of our own. And so there in the Garden of Eden, God gave Adam and Eve the ability to choose – they could choose to love God or they could put themselves first.

.....And we all know that when confronted with that choice they made the wrong one and found themselves thrown out of that place where love had been around in abundance; thrown out of the place where they could simply have revelled in God's love for them and enjoyed the beauty of that place and the beauty of their

relationship with God himself. Is the place where you reside in your heart and your mind a place where love abounds or have the choices you've made in your life taken you away from the close relationship with God that you once enjoyed?

Garden of Gethsemane

→ The choices made by Adam and Eve and by the rest of the human race throughout history, bring us to another garden where love is displayed in bucket loads; a garden where God's plan to restore the relationship of love that had been broken between himself and the human race is played out; the Garden of Gethsemane.

.....When we recall the story of the Garden of Eden we remember it as a story about temptation; about the human race giving in to the temptation to be like God. "You won't die, you can be like God." That was Satan's line for Eve; a line for which she fell. Notice that here as Jesus enters the Garden of Gethsemane, his first words to his disciples are, "Pray that you will not fall into temptation." It's another garden, in another place and time, but the temptation is the same, "You need not die; you need, not drink this cup." "Father if it is your will take this cup of suffering away from me!"

.....But this time the response to the temptation is different. In Eden, that place of beauty and innocence and delight, Adam and Eve, the ones that had been given the task of looking after the place were thrown out. Here in Gethsemane, a place that we perhaps often think of as being dark and sad and a bit foreboding, the response of Jesus to what is being asked of him by the Father transforms the garden into a place where love abounds. "Not my will, but your will be done!"

→ You may be aware that Gethsemane literally means "oil-press." The fruit, like the olives that grew in Gethsemane, was pressed and squeezed out into oil, with all the skin and the stems being thrown away. And here in this garden, Jesus too was pressed. Luke says that sweat fell from him like drops of blood as he agonised over doing the one thing that God was asking of him. And in the end, he was obedient to his Father and died on the cross all for love of us.

.....The one command that Adam and Eve were given in the Garden of Eden was "not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." And even though they may have expressed their love for God in countless other ways as they cared for the garden during their brief stay in that place of beauty, they failed to express their love and their obedience in this one thing that God had asked of them. It wasn't about the tree itself – it was about doing the one thing that God asked.

.....Very often we can express our love for God and for each other in all manner of ways that are entirely commendable and worthy, but often those things don't actually demand that much of us because they seem like good things for us to do. They fit in with our natural inclinations. But is there one thing that God is asking of you, just as he was asking of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane? Is there something that you are sweating over right now in your life, because you know it's what you should do, but somehow it's just asking too much; just stretching you that little bit too far; just demanding too much and you're not sure if your love for God is that strong.

.....The garden is a place of growth and a place of love. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus committed to the way of the cross which is the greatest symbol of God's love for you and me and for the whole world. The world had never seen love like that before and has never seen love like that since and that love can transform people like you and me into people who find joy in being obedient to God's call on our lives. That love restored the relationship between us and God and it's such love that God longs to see develop in our lives as we reach out to one another.

Garden of New Jerusalem

→ And finally, we arrive at the garden in the New Jerusalem where everything is beautiful and just as it should be once more. Here in this place God reigns. Here in this place love reigns. In place of disobedience, in place of anger, in place of injustice, in place of sin, love reigns. Christ has returned to his rightful place and the one who brings temptation has been defeated. Everything it seems has come full circle and in every place we have seen love in evidence.

.....Love is a critical part of God's plan; God is love and maybe that's why it's the first fruit mentioned in that list of the fruit of the spirit that we considered this morning. You may remember that before he died, Jesus told his disciples that it would be their love for one another that would help others to know that they were his followers. And that the evidence of their love for him would be seen in their obedience to him.

→ In the parable of the sower that we can find in Matthew 13, you may remember that there are four kinds of soil mentioned. There's the footpath that has become hard and packed down; there's the shallow soil which has very little depth because there are rocks underneath and so roots can't go deep into the soil; there's the soil full of weeds simply waiting to choke any new growth and then lastly there's the fertile soil which is just waiting to enable seeds to grow.

.....Which kind of soil is your life providing for the seeds of the fruit of the spirit that is love? Has God's kind of love really taken root in your heart and life? It's the kind of love that creates beauty and opportunity as we see in the Garden of Eden. It's the kind of love that never gives up on people and that looks to restore situations and relationships as we see in the Garden of Gethsemane. And it's the kind of love that is persistent and full of hope and victorious as we see in the Garden of the New Jerusalem.

.....That's the kind of love God wants to see growing in our lives because he loves us and he knows what is possible for each of us and for the whole of his creation. So, as we gather around this table on which bread and wine stand as reminders of the ultimate sacrifice of love, made for you and for me, by God in Christ may each of us allow love to become deeply rooted in our hearts and lives and displayed in abundance through our words and actions.