

Bishop Seraphim (Sigrist)

The Past, Present and Future of the Garden of Eden

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Psychologists tell us that a child has memories of the time before birth and a sense of a loss of that peaceful time. The human race also remembers the Garden of Eden from the time before history began and feels a lost innocence. This is one of the themes of the Orthodox liturgical prayers at the beginning of lent, Adam described as weeping outside of paradise which he has lost but remembers.

However this sense of loss and of longing is not the only way in which the Garden of Eden of Genesis 1-3 remains in the human and Christian imagination.

In this brief paper I will intend to suggest some of the other dimensions of Eden. We will not intend to deal with a theological question of to what extent 'Eden' is lost , except by implication, but to consider its persistent presence to the human imagination and understanding of experience.

Perhaps we might begin with a poem by the New York Jewish poet Charles Reznikoff which Fr Schmemmann loved/

New York 1951 Charles Reznikoff

**"As I was wandering with my unhappy thoughts,
I looked and saw
that I had come into a sunny place,
familiar and yet strange.**

"Where am I?" I asked a stranger. "Paradise."

**"Can this be Paradise?" I asked surprised,
for there were motor cars and factories.**

"It is," he answered.

**"This is the sun that shone on Adam once;
the very wind that blew upon him, too."**

**Indeed balancing the sense of loss is the realization that after
all this is still the world which God made. For the Christian it
is Christ who reveals the world as God intended it ,so
at Vespers of Christmas we sing in the Orthodox Church,**

**"O come, let us rejoice in the Lord as we declare this present
mystery:**

**The partition wall of disunion has been destroyed, the flaming
sword is turned back, the cherubim withdraw from the Tree of
Life, and I partake of the food of Paradise..."**

**and St Maximus, in Ambigua 41, includes the reunion of the
earth as paradise(Eden) with the human world among the five
unifications accomplished in the risen Christ. the others being:
the union of male and female, of heaven and earth, of the
sensible and the intelligible, of the created and the uncreated.**

Yet if at moments such as Reznikoff records in his poem, this

world and Eden indeed merge , still for the most part we do not feel ourselves in Paradise, or at least not fully and simply so.

Jewish spiritual writing flowered in Spain where gardens were very important in life, in particular of upper class people, and it is through Spain that formal gardens entered Europe. With this background these writers came to see the world we know as sustained by upper and inner gardens...going back to Eden. The Garden, Arthur Green says in summarizing this thought, is "a hidden level within the divine and human being and not just the lost garden of the Biblical story, nor is it only the paradise to which souls will rise after death. Eden is the upper world mirrored in the garden's we know. Garden within garden, the upper ones sustaining the lower..."

The image the river of continual creation flowing from the Eden above down into our world...

Dante expresse a similar vision in his description of the Earthly Paradise at the top of Mount Purgatory which is the Garden of Eden. It has been placed there to keep it above all the disorder of the level of daily life in the world.

Here the wind blows in accord with the movement of the stars. In the great forest of this garden there are no paths and yet it is easy to find one's way and Dante sees a pagent procession and then finds two rivers. Drinking from one removes all the bitterness of memory, from the second restores the awareness of good. I think perhaps this section, at the center of the Divine Comedy, is a very rich and important one, and one which itself

is a garden, delightful to visit.

In recent years in the time of the charismatic renewal, the american hymn writer Andy Park, likely unacquainted with Jewish spirituality or even with Dante, had a sort of vision of a river flowing down from the Mountain of God and he wrote a hymn which begins...

**"Down the mountain the river flows
And it brings refreshing wherever it goes
Through the valleys and over the fields
The river is rushing and the river is here..."**

The sense of Eden as the inner life of things lies behind the English poet Gerard Manly Hopkins's concept of "inscape", of the inwardness of things.

Helen Gardner said "To Hopkins, an inscape was something more than a delightful sensory impression: it was an insight, by divine grace, into the ultimate spiritual reality, seeing the pattern, air, melody, in things from, as it were, God's side'." Hopkins liked especially the medieval philosopher Dun Scotus and may have likely understood Scotus' 'thisness' of a thing its "haecceitas" as corresponding to his 'inscape'.

Perhaps then, in this very brief survey, we see perhaps that not

only is the Garden of Eden not simply a memory of a human emergence in the past, or on the other hand the projection to

the past of a future as it may be, but in Christian and also in Jewish spirituality it is a level within, implicit within and sustaining of, our reality.

To end with a parallel to Adam weeping outside Paradise here is the poet Robert Lax waiting for a Paradise which is both waited for, and experienced now in the waiting and in the inwardness of things, and which also is remembered.

"I'm looking ahead. Looking towards some point. some vanishing point, or anyway, not yet visible point in the distance, in the future where something or someone I'd recognize would appear.

(where you would appear)...

My person, my beloved, if you like; my sought-after-being, my remembered one, would be there."

The Garden of Eden is always with us, as remembered, as sought after, and as mysteriously present at each moment.