

Homily for Wednesday Evening Mass at the University of Dallas
Wednesday of the Fifth Week in the Year – February 12, 2025
FR. STEPHEN GREGG, O.CIST.

readings: Genesis 2:4b-9, 15-17 – Mark 7:14-23

THIS week we have begun a daily reading of the Book of Genesis that runs through next week. The Church has reserved for this Friday the account of the serpent and the Fall... so that will be the one for Valentine's Day this year, already rebranded as the less romantic feast of the brothers Saints Cyril and Methodius.

But today we get the Garden in its freshness; it's the lovely account of God's making the garden that invites our consideration, to meditate on where we began, and where we were first invited to progress in God. The human being awakens first in Eden, in what the Vulgate had translated as a *paradisum voluptatis*, a paradise of pleasure: "Out of the ground the LORD God made various trees grow that were delightful to look at and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." Then God sets the human being there to "cultivate and care for it," with the additional command to eat freely of all the trees but not that one we know.

What should we make of that one tree, of the knowledge of good and evil? I agree with St. Augustine's thought and his sentiment here when he writes in one of his commentaries on Genesis, "Even as I return to consider it over and over again, it cannot be said just how pleasant this thought is to me, that that tree was not poisonous for food." God did not put a bad tree into the garden and then just warn them not to eat it. It is not that the knowledge of good and evil is death, as if the fruit were poisonous: it's the transgression of the precept that leads to death. Eating of it against obedience means we know the good by contrast with the command, starting with the experience of evil; refraining from eating it would have meant knowing evil as well, but evil not experienced, but known from what St. Augustine calls *prudencia boni*, wisely being good. That is, clinging to the good means avoiding its loss, and so knowing that absence in a way, and feeling what's lost, on the other hand, by experience of the evil, means sort of knowing the good. The tree is a single, good tree, but two attitudes to it are available to the first of us: we eat of it and know by dying, or refrain from it and know by living. Almost as if to say man could

attain the knowledge of good and evil either by eating or by not eating, by the path of disobedient grasping of the evil or the path of patient obedience toward the good.

So why does the Lord give this order to eat freely of all but that one – if it’s a good tree? The command is not something negative. Rather, it is only having some command to obey that man can experience God as He is, experience God as Lord: indeed, by the command God reveals himself as Lord. He has created man in a garden that directs man toward obedience, and in the gentlest possible way – eat freely of all but that one, and by not eating that one you still have all you need! God opens to man the path of obedience, which is the path of course of being a child of God: the Lord offers a path to Adam toward discovering what his being truly means, toward the deepest self-knowledge – his existence speaks, “You are my beloved child.” St. Augustine writes, “It was fitting that man, placed under the Lord God, be prohibited in some regard, so that the virtue by which he deserves well of his Lord should be obedience itself,” – something personal, adding to what St. Augustine says here, something personal, not just “how well can you manage the garden,” “how many apples can you produce” but by the obedience – which, continuing with St. Augustine, he says, “I can most truly say is the only virtue for every rational creature acting under the authority of God; and that the first and principal vice of pride is to want to use one’s own power for one’s own ruin, the name of which vice is disobedience. So there would be no way for man to think and experience that he has a Lord unless something be commanded to him.” (*de Genesi ad litteram*)

The “human position” (Auden) of delight at the beginning, the very beginning, is an experience of richly ordered interconnection: Man is placed in a relation of obedience to the Lord, and is himself set as master over the other creatures. He is given a work to tend to, but is not given the immense strength or speed, or claws and horns and wings and other cool things the animals have that make them good workers, so man by his physical situation is invited to take his place as master over the other beings, whom he needs, even while he is called to live in obedience to the Lord, whose very breath fills man with life, whose

very fingers formed him from the clay. So in our beginning, our very beginning, before the Fall, we are made to work and serve: Eden is not a place of idle relaxation, but a garden to tend with responsibility. The penalty of original disobedience is not the work but rather the *difficulty* of work – work itself is a great good. St. Augustine points out that even now we see some people who just love farming and hate being called to do anything else; and all the more in paradise, he says, “For it was not the affliction of labor, but the exhilaration of the will, when those things which God had created would come forth more abundantly and fruitfully by the assistance of human labor; on account of which the Creator himself would be more roundly praised, since he had given reason and ability for working to the rational soul constituted in an animal body, to the extent that would be satisfactory for the willing mind, not to the extent that bodily necessity would force man unwillingly to work.” That’s our initial position, to work with no obstacles, using all our God-given forces, to the perfect satisfaction of our fully willing minds – (it’s not Wednesday Lit Trad II at eight in the morning, but we’re on the way) – and on top of that to revere our Lord by observing one simplest command that comports no loss at all.

I’ll reach a little further, dangerously leaving St. Augustine behind and turning to a thought that came to me while hearing some of Paul’s letter to the Galatians this morning. Perhaps by prohibiting the one tree, God not only reveals himself to man as Lord, one who should command, but also makes room for something more, for faith, invites hope for the not yet known fruit of obedience – the fruit of disobedience is hanging right there, but there’s something else maybe promised – he establishes man in a position in which something is still not fully possessed, in which the boundary of will and desire and need is felt, in which even amid such abundantly fruitful work something is still to be hoped for, but hoped for from God: a mysterious fruit of obedience that transcends and incorporates the knowledge that would be obtained by rebellious consuming. Here’s the mystery: we, in Adam, have chosen not to abide in life by obedience, but instead by disobedience to traverse the pathways of death, to be consumed by death – and yet, here we still are, because in God the path of death leads again to life: God is

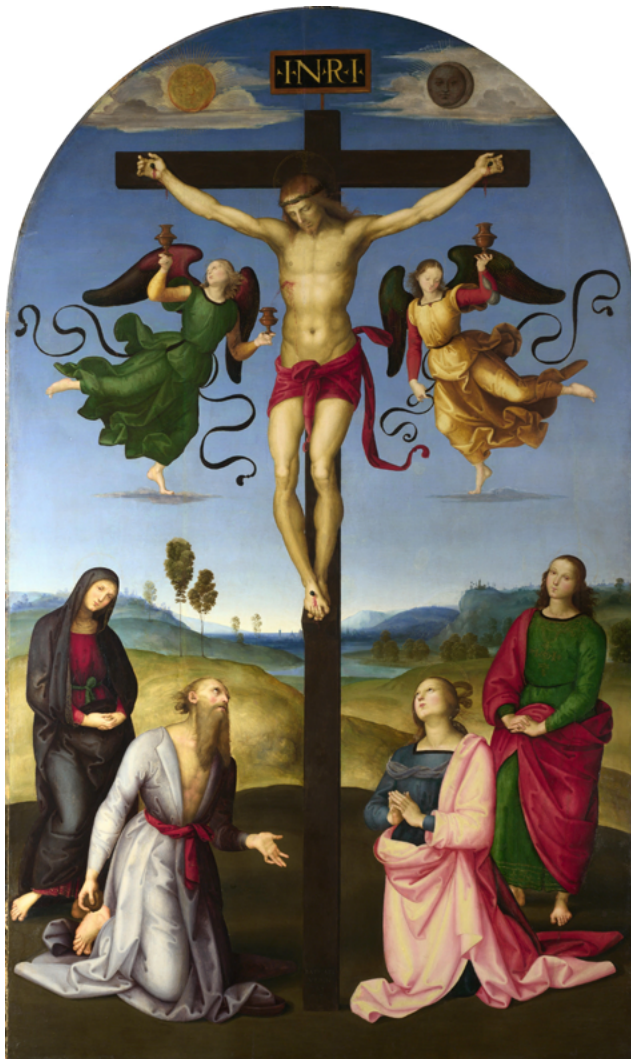
not afraid, it turns out, to become man and die. I can't explain this very clearly, but something about what the Lord says here in Eden, as if he has a gift to give even in the prohibition, hints at a call and a promise: "Don't eat that one; by which I mean, just stay here with me." We refuse at first, but we haven't defeated God's subtle promise by doing so. The tree of life is still there – we've made it dangerous for us, and so need to be expelled from the Garden, but it's still there. The tree of life becomes fearful to us, becomes the Cross, but there where we can't reach on our own, death's defeat begins. And when the penitent thief prays to Jesus, the Lord reopens the gate of paradise to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise." God did not fear our death in the garden, because for him even death is life. We chose a different path, but he could still catch us.

So where is our paradise? It's not an idle and relaxed place we are looking to find once in a while. Where is that guarded and abundantly gifted place where the soul can resume its life in hope of God? Is it that strange garden that Dante finds atop Mount Purgatory, or the "paradise within, happier far," promised to Adam and Eve in Milton's poem, or more weirdly, in *Moby-Dick*, that "insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy" within the soul of each man "encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life," or is it that little east room at Mansfield Park, or is it the snowy woods we stop to watch for a little too long – just to throw out a few images.

Where is our paradise? We seek a place of work and obedience that bears with it a promise of God's presence. A place of work and obedience that bears with it a promise of God's presence. Naturally enough, I think of the monastery, which is, well, exactly what I just repeated, in the form of a workshop with a rule and an abbot, the "paradise of the cloister," as St. Bernard put it. He says, "The cloister is truly a paradise, a region guarded by the wall of discipline, in which there is abundant fruitfulness of the most precious goods. 'A glorious thing, for men to dwell in one way of life in a single home,' 'how good and joyful it is for brothers to live in unity' (quoting some psalms). You can see one mourning his sins, another exulting in praise of God, this one ministering to all, that one teaching others; this one praying, that

one reading; this one having mercy, that one punishing sins; this one burning with love, that one prevailing with humility; this one humble in prosperity, that one uplifted in adversity; this one working among active things, that one resting in contemplative things; you could see that and you could say: “This is God’s dwelling place!”” (*de diversis* 42)

We are created to dwell in, and establish by the gifts of the Spirit that we are given, some such gardens of work and obedience alongside each other, and there to experience together our path of return to the one from whom we departed by disobedience (RB prologue). This paradise is not some dream. Christ opens it to us on the Cross, and offers to water it with his own blood at this altar.



Raphael
the Mond Crucifixion

