

## Closer to God's Heart

(Revelation 3, vs 20; Acts 28, vs 26-27)

"Keeping busy are we?" The voice startled Amad. He looked up into the light from the dark ground where he was weeding, and the contrast dazzled him "You're keeping it nice, very nice." The stranger continued, looking round at what had been achieved. Amad squinted, trying to make out who was speaking to him. There was something familiar about the voice, but Amad couldn't place it. "It looks lovely, really peaceful."

"Well, you're closer to God's heart in a garden than anywhere else on earth." Amad had done it now, he'd responded and started a conversation, the last thing he'd wanted. Silently he cursed the gap in the hedge through which the man was peering. He'd meant to board it up until the conifer he'd planted had grown to fill the gap.

"Yes, it all started in a garden; men and women working together with God, to tend the land." The stranger spoke again and Amad became concerned as well as irritated. Was this one of those religious maniacs he wondered? He'd got better things to do than listen to that. He sensed, rather than saw, the man smile. No, Amad thought, he didn't seem like a Bible basher. Still he'd better deflect the conversation.

"I don't know about God, this is mainly down to me." Amad nodded in the direction of his garden. "You should see the state it gets into if I leave it to the Almighty. Look at old Fred's plot, down the road. It's gone completely wild since he stopped working on it."

"Well God continues to maintain the foundations on which nature depends and thrives, even when we're not there to tend it. How is Fred, by the way?" Amad was embarrassed to admit he didn't know, excusing himself on the grounds of business for not having visited Fred since he'd been taken ill. "Poor old Fred, I don't think he gets many visitors." The man seemed less a stranger to Fred than Amad was.

"You'd think those people from the church would visit him, he used to go there regularly when he was well," Amad decided to point the finger elsewhere, but it didn't work.

"I suppose, like you, they have other things to do. Being religious can be quite demanding if you take it seriously."

"I don't think many of them do take it seriously. Even some of the preachers and ministers don't seem to believe in the Bible any more: perhaps they're right. I saw a programme on the tele recently that said most of the stories in the Bible didn't really happen! They were just made up to encourage people to follow the faith. And hasn't science disproved most of what Christians believe? Anyway, I don't think you have to go to church to be a Christian. I know many good people who never go." Amad was still trying to keep the conversation from focussing on himself.

"It should certainly be more about who you know than where you go. About being before doing." Amad wasn't quite sure what the stranger meant by that, but at least he seemed to agree with him.

"I can 'be', here in this garden." Amad was drawn into making it personal again.

"Be yourself, is that what you mean, doing what you wish?"

"Yes, being satisfied with what I've achieved."

"And that brings you closer to God's heart?"

"I think so: I'm sure he enjoys the garden, just like I do."

"Ah you're sure, so he's told you?"

Amad wasn't that close to the Almighty and he knew it. He felt trapped, not knowing how to respond. "Er... we don't poke our noses into each others' affairs." He made the comment pointedly. Perhaps the stranger would realise that invading people's space wasn't acceptable in this neighbourhood. The conversation was getting much too personal for Amad so he underlined the point. "In any case faith is a private matter: there are many different types of religions in the world, all trying to reach up to God. They're all equally valid."

The stranger was silent, as though he was pondering what Amad had said, but then he spoke again. "Sadly, I'm sure you're right, but it's such a long way."

"A long way! What's a long way?" Amad thought, but he was shrewd enough not to say anything. He wanted out of this conversation and was hoping the man would take the hint. But he didn't.

"A long way to reach up to God that is." It was as if he'd read Amad's mind. "It's almost too far for anyone to manage it back to the garden without His help. Trouble is, people don't seem prepared to ask."

"Well, anyone can come into this garden whenever they like." Amad wasn't as confused as his statement implied. He now knew what the man meant, but whenever the subject of getting back with God came up, something inside him wanted to close it down.

"That's good of you Amad. It's certainly a very nice garden. As you say, maybe visitors will find God here. You could of course make it a little easier for them." The stranger looked sideways, along Amad's high impenetrable hedge towards the large locked gates, and another point was made.

"Here it comes," thought Amad. The trouble was he liked to be secure and inaccessible in his property. He wasn't a recluse, mind you. He would always see anyone to suit. You had to be careful with people though. Some folk could make excessive demands on your time and, heaven forbid, your money. Charity begins at home, yes; he was a firm believer in that. Not that he was mean; he was always willing to donate out of his excess. Why, only the other week he'd given that girl across the road a couple of quid for the fun run she'd done for the local hospice.

Amad's mind was working overtime preparing to defend his right to privacy. The problem was that his visitor had not moved from the deeper issue, one that Amad was even less willing to resolve.

"At the moment this garden's rather full of you. Why don't you ask God to come and join in? I think He'd appreciate an invitation and you'd be surprised how much you and He could transform things, working together." With that the stranger was gone.

Amad's defences had been breached and it made him angry. He shouldn't have to take this sort of thing from someone he knew, let alone a stranger. He drove the little fork he'd been weeding with back into the ground and rose to his feet. It wouldn't wait any longer: that gap in the hedge, he'd board it up now.