Anglican-Lutheran Society Conference in Hamburg

11th to 15th September 2026

'A Changing Church in an Age of Migration'

Sermon preached at the Morning Eucharist in Sankt Michaelis Lutheran Church by Pastorin Julia Atze, pictured here with the Rev Lagle Heinla

God creates the human being – in Hebrew 'Adam' – out of earth, or more precisely out of the dust of the earth, in Hebrew 'adamah', and breathes life into them. That's what we are told in the so-called second creation account, which we heard a little earlier. In the first creation story, which comes directly before it in the Bible, God creates the earth in seven days – you know the story: light and darkness, day and night, heaven and earth, land and water, sun, moon and stars, plants and animals and, last of all, human beings. Everything is created by God speaking.

Here, in the second account, it is different. Nothing had yet been created except earth and dust – and a stream, a river that watered the earth

> *Then the Lord God formed the human from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. (Genesis 2.7)*

God creates the human being first of all – and not from good top soil or humus, but from the dust of the earth, the very stuff we brush off our trousers and wipe off our shoes when we come home. He draws very close to the human beings and gently breathes life into them. God does not merely speak; God makes and does.

Then God plants the garden of Eden and sets Adam, the human being, within it so that he might keep and tend that from which he himself was created: 'Adamah', the earth.

Interestingly, even in the Garden of Eden, in Paradise, human existence is not a life in the Land of Cockaigne – that fabled land of idle plenty – in which the human being indulges in idleness. No: the human being is a working creature, even in Paradise. To work, to have a task to do, to do something meaningful, to tend God's garden – this is what makes us human, just as God created us to be.

This also helps us understand why there are two creation accounts: two different narratives standing side by side that were never combined into a single, contradiction free chronology.

So it is not a matter of giving logical or scientific explanation of how the world came into being, but rather of showing different aspects of where we come from and what we are here for – not science but religious poetry which reveals the ground of human existence.

The second creation account establishes relationship, bringing everything into connection: God creates the human being, breathes upon him, fills him with life and then gives him a task – God has built him a garden which the human being is to till and keep. The human being is created as a relational creature – in relationship with God, with nature, with other living creatures and with other human beings: it is not good that man should be alone, as it says a few verses later.

However – we are no longer in the Garden of Eden. The story has moved on. The human being – now man and woman – and at least one serpent resisted God's command. Ate of the forbidden fruit, incurred guilt and gained knowledge. He, the human being, humankind, had to leave Paradise, out into the world and so to become self-reliant. But out here in the world not everything is as well ordered as in a beautifully laid-out garden; in the world strife and war, hatred and enmity hold sway. The human being is left to his own devices, must make decisions – for good or ill – and there is no going back. The Garden of Eden, Paradise, is lost. But the story of Paradise is not.

We can read it and hear it again and again, remind ourselves of it, chafe against it and make it fruitful for our life and for our future. Eden, Paradise, the garden of God, remains a place of longing.

So we seek out our own paradisal gardens, our own places of longing, close to home: our own garden, balcony, allotment or the park – whether the Michel Meadow, Planten und Bloomen or the Stadtpark. And in the many people sense a meaning, a connection to nature, to God, to one another – whether one is sitting on a park bench gazing into a tree's crown, watering flowers or pulling weeds, watching children at play or reading a book on a blanket – gardens are peaceful, restorative places, and, in the best sense, grounding ones.

But even though with our gardens we create powerful counter-places to the ordinary world, Paradise, the Garden of Eden, is and remains a utopia – that is a no-place, a non-place. However many parks and gardens there may be, we cannot attain Paradise in this world, in our life. It remains a cherished dream, a place of hope. And this cherished dream is not senseless or superfluous; this cherished dream, this utopia, changes me, my actions, the present.

When I dream of Paradise, of a better world – and I do so every now and then when I am in despair over the state of the world, appalled at how people treat one another, at the hatred and violence of which human beings are capable – and this is especially true for me since last Sunday and the election result in Saxony-Anhalt – then I go into the garden or in my case onto the balcony, water the flowers and dream of Paradise – and of the peace of the world – of people going out to meet one another with open arms, people who dare to take the first step even at the risk of being hurt, people who encounter one another without fear of coming off worse, people who do not have to win at any price, people who stand up for others without thinking of their own advantage.

And then I sense how despair and fear grow smaller, and hope and courage grow greater, and that this is not merely a dream. I know that such people exist. Sometimes I manage myself to be such a person, and I do indeed also witness others living and acting in this way.

One person lived out this dream of a better, original world, of Paradise, completely and entirely: Jesus Christ. He lived out true peace, he took all guilt upon himself, died for us and rose again. He showed us how it could be and so changed the world. And we too can do this: be courageous and follow him – and change this world in small steps. We can begin with dreams in our gardens, for I am quite certain that it

is surely no coincidence that, on Easter morning, before the empty tomb, Mary Magdalene mistook him, the Risen One, for a gardener. Amen

The Interior of Skt Michaelis Church as we arrived. By the time the service began it was full!