

First Sunday of Lent Year A

Colour: purple

Genesis 2.15-17; 3.1-7

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.'

The First Sin and Its Punishment

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden"?' The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die." ' But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

What's going on?

This story is used today because it is a story of temptation. God clearly told Adam and Eve not to touch the fruit of the tree, but in the story the serpent suggests to Eve that God had particular motives for forbidding them the tree. In other words, the serpent makes God seem human in being jealous of keeping his power and knowledge hidden from Adam and Eve. Eve therefore forgets that God is God and that human beings should live in obedience to the Creator's Will. The serpent has already changed the relationship between God and human beings as soon as he persuades Eve to think about God in this way. Temptation is clearly described too. Eve is hungry and the fruit is good to eat. She enjoys beauty and the tree is delightful. She wants to know more and the serpent has said the tree will give her knowledge. She gives in to her senses and to her imagination, even

though she knows deep down that she should pay attention to what God has said to her about how she should use them. She forgets that God is God. The result is that the relationship with God is broken. Adam and Eve now see themselves and each other differently. Knowledge is not what they thought it would be. This story of temptation and the coming of sin into the world prepares us for what Jesus did in response to temptation.

Psalm 32 (psalm 31 RC)

The Joy of Forgiveness

Of David. A Maskil.

**Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.**

**Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.**

**While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.**

**For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.**

Selah

**Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;**

**I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD',
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.**

Selah

**Therefore let all who are faithful
offer prayer to you;**

**at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters
shall not reach them.**

You are a hiding-place for me;

you preserve me from trouble;

you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

Selah

I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;

I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

**Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,
else it will not stay near you.**

**Many are the torments of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.
Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.**

What's going on?

This psalm reminds us that although we are all like Eve, giving in to temptation and forgetting that God is God, yet God is always ready to forgive when we make mistakes, or make a mess of our lives. The outcome of the Garden of Eden might make us think that God is all about punishment, but the psalmist reassures us that God is all about forgiveness if we are truly sorry and want to make a new start.

Romans 5.12-19

Adam and Christ

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned— sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.

But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgement following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those

who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

What's going on?

St Paul helps us to understand the link between the story of Adam and Eve and Jesus himself. The story of Adam and Eve tells us how sin comes so easily into the world and once it is there, you can't get rid of it. We live in a messy, imperfect world, and we have messy, imperfect hearts, minds and bodies. This is the business of being human. The problem with human beings falling so easily into sin is that it makes it impossible to have a perfect relationship with God and that cuts us off from God. God wants to forgive us and restore the original, perfect relationship that was in Adam and Eve's life with God before the Fall, but how are we supposed to get to that forgiveness when sin is everywhere? The answer is that God gives us that chance as a free gift, in and through Jesus. God comes to our imperfect, messy world and experiences what it is like to be a human being just like us. He feels the same temptations and evil things, but because his will is perfectly aligned with the Father, he can overcome these things as we cannot. When Jesus dies on the cross in obedience to God's will, he takes with him all the sin of the imperfect world and defeats its power to separate us from God. We know this, because he did not stay dead, but was resurrected by God and appeared to his disciples to show them for certain that we can once again live in perfect relationship with God in an eternal life. The resurrected Jesus was the proof of this salvation and eternal life. How do we do this? We have inherited the world of Adam and Eve, but by believing in what God did in Jesus we can inherit the eternal life God wants for us: 'just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous'.

Matthew 4.1-11

The Temptation of Jesus

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But he answered, 'It is written,

"One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." '

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

"He will command his angels concerning you",
and "On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." '

Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." '

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

"Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him." '

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

What's going on?

This is the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. He prepares himself by withdrawing from human society and fasting. His purpose is to focus clearly on what God wants and on the life he must fulfil in obedience to God. As the Son, Jesus lives in perfect relationship with the Father, but he is also a human being and so not immune from being tempted away from that relationship by needs, wants and desires. Temptation of the body begins, for Jesus is famished, yet there is nothing to eat. He could therefore exploit his power to change the nature of the world and feed his own needs and desires. But this would be to forget what God wants of him, and so he has to resist this temptation of the body, put aside his starvation and focus back on God. This is what he does. Next, he experienced temptation of the mind.

He could try to force God to do his will, and prove to himself that he is God's beloved Son by putting his life deliberately in danger. To do so ruins his relationship with God by testing God instead of surrendering to him. Lastly, his spirit is tempted. As God's Son, he could use his power to become a great king, ruling over people and land. He could have riches and honour. But to do so would entirely turn aside from God's plan for him. He would have to give up his ministry and become the kind of king many people were hoping for, but making God's plan for the salvation of all people impossible.

The temptation is dramatically offered to us as a dialogue between Jesus and the Devil. The Devil does the testing, trying to see if Jesus can be dissuaded from his purpose and intent, just as Eve had a dialogue with the serpent which led to her disobeying God. But Jesus manages to put temptation aside each time by focusing back on God whose word makes it clear what he should and should not do. Through the dialogue then, we see how to make right decisions and avoid the pitfalls of sin. The passage also reminds us that when Jesus had resisted all the temptations he was rewarded and his needs attended to. The struggle with sin is difficult, but if we succeed, we are rewarded. God knows what we have to go through.

Why these passages?

These passages have theological complexity, but in Lent it is important for us to start thinking about what we have learned about who Jesus was since the Christmas season and begin to apply that to his purpose and ministry. How did he end up on the road to crucifixion and how did he decide what God wanted him to do? On this first Sunday of Lent, we have to start to think about what his ultimate purpose was and how he accepted it. During the rest of Lent we will think about what that meant and this prepares us for the events of Holy Week and Easter.