

First Sunday of Lent  
Year of Matthew

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7  
Romans 5:12-19  
Matthew 4:1-11

The story of Adam and Eve is remarkable for the many different layers at which it operates. You can tell it to a group five years olds and they will love it. It has also been the focus of endless seriously intellectual theology. It is, in a way, rather like a Russian Doll or an onion. The more you delve into it the more you find.

It is a story that we can find difficult. I wonder if the reason we find it difficult is that we think too hard about it. We get too intellectual. We try to get to the middle of the onion too quickly when we should really just stay with the outer layer. In that sense the five year old has got it right. It is a great story and we need to react not primarily with our minds but with our hearts. The surest guide to the meaning of the story of Adam and Eve is not what we think about it but what we feel about it.

So how do you feel? I feel a sense of liberation. When I read the story of Adam and Eve I feel as if a window has been opened; or scales have dropped from my eyes; or a penny has dropped. I feel as if the world around me makes a little more sense. And, more importantly, I feel as if I make more sense.

There is rather more to the story than we heard today for, as I am sure you know, God discovers what Adam and Eve have done and he punishes them for their disobedience: he expels them from the Garden of Eden and tells the woman that she will endure intense pain in childbearing and the man that he will endure unending hard labour as the ground yields thistles and brambles.

What I like about the story is that it takes seriously the problem of suffering. If God is all-powerful and all loving it is not obvious why there should be so much pain in human life. The answer offered by the author of Genesis is that it is a punishment for our disobedience. It was not part of God's original plan. This pain is the eventual consequence of the disobedience of Adam and Eve; the immediate consequence is that, for the first time, they feel a sense of shame at their own nakedness and they make loincloths out of fig leaves. This awareness of shame is more profound than the awareness of suffering. It is commonplace to believe that there is

something wrong with a world in which there is physical pain. But the author Genesis also knows that there is something wrong in our sense of shame. In his telling of Adam and Eve's discovery of their own nakedness, the author of Genesis is telling us that shame is not natural, it is not what God intended. But it is almost universal. Dressing scantily is not uncommon, whether it be on the beaches of the south of France or in remote rural areas of Africa; but I would suggest that complete nakedness is really quite rare. But this is not only true in a physical sense – it is true emotionally. It is common for human beings to have sense of shame about who they are, to feel the need to apologize for who they are, to hide themselves from other people, to put on a front, to hide behind a mask. It is common but not natural. This shame is not what God intended.

And there are other remarkable things about this story. It is not a simple case of Adam and Eve deciding to disobey God. In fact neither of them shows the slightest inclination to do so until the serpent puts it into Eve's mind. At first she resists but the serpent insists that if she eats it, far from dying, she will be like the gods. And so she gives in; and having eaten the forbidden fruit then urges Adam to do the same. Adam and Eve sin when tempted by an outside force. And, when confronted by God they both pass the buck – Adam to Eve and Eve to the serpent.

This is so true to life! We do pass the buck. But the serpent did tempt Eve; and in the same way we are subject to powers beyond ourselves. Sometimes it is in our genes; sometimes it is in our environment and there can be no doubt that what we experience in our early years leaves a lasting impression and may express itself in our choices. The serpent is always with us. This is the heart of human life and was recognized by St Paul in his letter to the Romans:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want,  
but I do the very thing I hate.

Romans 7:15

This is what has become known as original sin.

The author of Genesis does not have a great deal to offer other than an explanation. He offers us sympathy, and the biblical writers later offer the law so that we can know what is right and wrong. But there is a sense that we have to live with the consequences of the sin of Adam and Eve.

But that changes with Christ and it is Paul who most effectively expresses this in today's reading from Romans. Paul sees how we share in Adam's sinfulness because, as he sees it, we are all descended from Adam. We are all sons and daughters of Adam. But Adam's disobedience, Adam's sin is now counteracted by the obedience of Jesus:

O loving wisdom of our God!  
When all was sin and shame,  
A second Adam to the fight  
And to the rescue came. John Henry Newman

But there is an apparent weakness in this argument. If Adam is the first man then we are truly descended from him. We share his humanity. But in what sense can we say that we share in Christ?

The answer is that we share in the life of Christ through our life in the church, through our baptism in which we are born again and through the Eucharist in which we share his body and blood. Paul explains the significance of baptism like this to the Romans:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

Romans 6:3-4

And Jesus himself explains the significance of the Eucharist:

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me.

John 6:56-7

But we have not really given any consideration to the nature of Adam and Eve's sin. What was so wrong about eating the forbidden fruit? At one level the answer is simple – it was forbidden. God had told them not to eat it – but they did. And for some people that will be sufficient explanation. They will feel no need to go any further. But it will not be enough for all. And

they will be an increasing number for we live in a society in which obedience, blind or otherwise, is valued less and less. Unquestioning acceptance of authority is less and less common. And I think that is, for the most part, a good thing.

But it means that when we come to eating the fruit we need to unpeel a further layer. Exactly why did God forbid Adam and Eve to eat of it?

Perhaps the answer lies in the serpent's justification for eating it: 'you will become like gods'. You will know good and evil. But we know that Adam and Eve prove unworthy to the task. They cannot cope with the responsibility. They become ashamed of their bodies and make loincloths. But even when they have done this, when God comes to visit them in the garden, they are ashamed and they hide even from him. They are punished by themselves before God inflicts his own external punishment. They cannot cope because they are not God.

To want to be like God is to want to be the ultimate judge of right and wrong; to recognize no authority beyond ourselves. In a personal sense that means absolute autonomy; that I am the only judge of what is right or wrong; or rather, that there is no right or wrong – there is what is right for you and what is right for me.

In a corporate sense it means that corporations and nations are answerable to no one except themselves. Within a nation democracy is the be all and end all. That was the way of thinking that led to the holocaust.

So what is the alternative to listening to the serpent? It is listening to the Spirit. We know that it is the spirit that speaks to us when what we hear is consistent with everything else we know from the scriptures about Jesus. And in its context I guess we can say that if we know something is right – then we do it. And we can do it knowing that Jesus, when he was tempted did the same:

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.

Jesus did what was right. And he was rewarded for it.

*N Clews*

*5<sup>th</sup> March 2017*