

Sermon Lent One 13th March 2011 Rebecca Newland,
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Lent 1A: Genesis 2.1-2, 12-17. Ps 32, Rom 5:12-21, Matthew 4.1-11

A relationship fractured by disobedience

At the beginning of Lent it is the perfect time to go back to the beginning, to the primeval story that tells us about our relationship to God and how that became fractured but also to compare what happens in that story to our gospel account of the temptation of Jesus. I've never actually preached on the story of Adam and Eve. I've given it a wide berth because although it is one of the best-known passages in the bible it is also easily misunderstood and misinterpreted. It has been used to prove all sorts of theological theories, some acceptable, others absurd. In fact going back and reading it very carefully you are struck by how much we associate with it is **not** in there. It actually doesn't mention the words paradise, original sin or evil. It doesn't talk about a fall from grace. It is a very simple story and what is in there is very insightful

I am not particularly interested in its literal truth – in fact I don't think there is an empirical fact in it but I do think it contains the collective truth about our human condition and tendencies. It is a story that confronts us with who we are in relation to God. If we listen carefully, if we allow ourselves to be caught up into the story, we begin to see *ourselves* standing before the forbidden tree, torn between obedience to God and our freedom to choose our own way. The Gospel story is also a story about temptation, obedience and choice but of course in that story Jesus chooses to follow God's way. When after 40 days of fasting in the wilderness he is tempted by the devil he stands incredibly firm and says – no. His gaze never seems to wander from God. His centre seems to not be compromised or shaken. When I hear the story I go – 'I want some of that'. I want that quality of obedience, commitment and integrity. In the story of Adam and Eve we find something quite different and something much more like us. We find a beautiful and whole relationship wrecked by a very bad choice.

At the beginning of the story we find that Adam and a companion have been placed in the garden of Eden to cultivate it and care for it. Two human beings that are meant to compliment each other and work together in harmony with the earth. Note that this is not some sensual paradise where men and women loll around naked doing nothing. It is a

place where fundamental relationships are complete and life giving.

Creation is cared for. The plants and animals provide sustenance for humans and God walks in the garden. The couple work and live together. The close relationship between the humans and their world is emphasized by the similarity of two Hebrew words: the man (Hebrew, *adam*) was created from the ground (Hebrew, *adamah*). Later we find that the woman has been called, Eve because she is the mother of all living. The emphasis is on well-ordered, harmonious relationships that exist in the context of human community. Part of Adam and Eve's essential character is to exist in relationships: with the earth, creation, with other people, and with God and in a real way they co-create with God.

In this garden everything is available for the man and woman. Everything. The only thing that is out of bounds is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God says quite clearly – eat freely of every other tree but not that one, if you do you shall die. So there are Adam and Eve sitting around enjoying the evening and talking about the day gardening and caring for the animals and plants and they said to one another, “Wow, here we are, at one with nature, at one with God, we'll never age, we'll never die, and all our dreams come true the instant we have them, wow”. And then they said, ‘Yeah...it's just not enough is it?’.

That's the beginning of the fracture – what they had was not enough. Even though it was abundant, balanced and life-giving they still wanted more. Perhaps the very fact that God told them they could not eat the forbidden fruit made them want it more. We all know what that is like. Our doctor tells us we have to cut down on alcohol, fats and sugar and boy do we start to crave it then. If you have ever fasted in lent you know how much you want something even though you've only been without it 24 hours. We human beings, even in this age of rationalism and technological wonders do not like limits and boundaries. When a boundary is put in front of us sometimes it is the only thing we can see. I wonder why do we not ask about all the other trees that *are permitted*? Why does prohibition bother us so?

Into this story of abundance with just one plant prohibited comes the serpent, the snake. Now although the poor serpent in this story has had the weight of all evil placed upon it in fact it is incidental – it is not some all powerful demonic power or Satan – it is just a very clever animal whose role in the story is to pose the question, the temptation. He draws

the woman into a conversation and asserts it knows God better than the woman. It imputes grudging intentions to God and it insinuates that God is envious. It sort of wheedles away at the woman's defences and good sense.

The woman considers what the serpent has said. This is probably her first mistake. She gets into a discussion with the voice that is telling her to disobey God. Jesus when he is confronted with the voice of Satan telling him to disobey his Father he simply doesn't go there and comes straight back with a clear no and the back up of God's word. Well the woman gets caught up in the argument and then does some thinking. She decides that the tree was good for food, that it is beautiful and that it would make her wise. It is fascinating isn't it? Eve has thought this thing through and aside from the critical fact that the tree is prohibited there appears to be many good reasons to eat of it's fruit. Nutrition, beauty and wisdom are all good things and although her thinking is distorted she comes to believe the fruit will open the door to these good things.

Temptation is always found at the boundaries and it is always associated with some perceived good. We do not choose what we believe is bad for us. Even someone who is addicted to smoking or alcohol do not choose their drug because they want to imbibe something bad. They do it because they believe some good will come from it's use – relaxation, a reduction in anxiety, some way to stop the tremors and shakes, or simply because their bodies are screaming out at them to have that cigarette or drink and they just want peace. Sometimes the enemy of the best is the good. Well Eve ate the fruit and gave some to Adam, who apparently was there with her and he ate as well. Food is at the centre of this story and the story of Jesus temptation. Adam and Eve believe that food will make them like Gods and they would therefore be independent of their creator. Jesus is tempted to turn stones into bread but he knows that humans cannot live on bread alone. He knows that we need God as well and are intrinsically dependent upon him. But Adam and Eve ignore God's boundaries, the way creation is set up, they eat the fruit and immediately their well ordered, harmonious world begins to disintegrate. There is no more talk of tending the garden. There is no more walking with God. There is only mistrust, blame, guilt, and alienation – and my goodness don't they blame each other. Not a one takes responsibility for their choices. The fracture has occurred. Fear and shame become embedded in the heart and a rift occurs at the depth of their being.

The phrase that describes this new reality is, "then the eyes of both

were opened". It is the same words the serpent used. Something really new is disclosed to them; but they have not become like gods. Instead they are 'stripped of their glory'. This then is not just some story about succumbing to temptation and feeling a little sorry about it and deciding to try and do better. This is a story that ultimately presents a person as separated from God, themselves and others with devastating consequences. It is a story where the characters have chosen following their will over following the will of God. They have turned away from God and life and chosen a path that leads to death and suffering. Now they must toil and work for food. It is no longer freely available and consequently becomes the abiding obsession with Adam, with humanity everywhere.

Yet at the very end of this story God does not abandon Adam and Eve. Yes there are negative consequences for the three characters – Adam, Eve and the serpent - but God does not throw them out and wander back inside without a backward glance. As they are leaving the garden of Eden God makes garments of skin for Adam and Eve and clothes them. He protects them from the worst consequences of their actions and metaphorically he gifts them with technology – the ability, or the means to use the natural world in creative ways to solve their problems.

This last piece of the story points to a central theme in the biblical story. All corruption, all confusion in the world, comes from sin, what human beings choose and do; but it is also true that the continually widening cleft between God and humanity is matched by an increasing power of grace. It is like no matter how far we humans take ourselves away from God he just keeps coming after us and will not give up. He reaches out across time and space to Abraham, Sarah, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Rachael, David and Solomon, Judith and Esther and countless and unknown others. It's like he keeps saying – "listen, do it my way and I guarantee blessings will follow. You were made to be with me". Mostly he is like a faithful, steadfast, constant lover who will never give up on his creation not matter how far it drifts from his embrace.

When we get to the events of 1st century Palestine we find God's grace incarnate, embodied in Jesus Christ. In Jesus we have a person who despite extraordinary temptation was obedient and faithful to God. At the end of his ordeal in the wilderness Angels care him for him and his needs are met. He put God first and food followed. For those who believe he is the Christ, he is the way back to that primal relationship: with the earth, creation, with other people, with ourselves and with God.

His obedience even unto death on a cross put the pieces back together. God says, "This is my beloved Son, listen to him". As we enter into the life of Christ we simultaneously enter into his life of obedience and ultimately the life of the Trinity. We enter into blessing and abundance. We move through death into eternal life, here and now.

You know God will not give up. What will you do?