

First Sunday in Lent - 2017

Of all the accounts in the scriptures the Old Testament reading we have just heard from Genesis - the story of Adam and Eve, the forbidden fruit and the serpent must rank up there in the top 10 for popularity. It has been discussed and argued over, used and misused, misrepresented, or just ignored. However we approach it, it is a crucial text because it is endeavouring to ask a fundamental question about humanity - why are we like we are? Why are we unsettled, why we do not seem to belong completely, why are we out of sorts, why do we seem to have this yearning for something, this itch that we can't scratch? As the psalmist wrote 'Why art thou so heavy, O my soul and why art thou so disquieted within me? Why indeed?

At a retreat I was attending the conductor, who was working as an ethicist, once described a meeting at a major teaching hospital. The infection control nurse complained bitterly that despite notices, campaigns, cajoling and outright shaming she could not get people to wash their hands. No one responded...well, he said, in my discipline we call it original sin! Our disobedience is staggering! We know what is good for us...but can we do it? Clearly the answer is no! Why? Can we hear an echo of the Garden Eden?

Browsing through bookshops today (if you can find one) they are full of autobiographies. Everyone from budding pop star, celebrity chef, sportsman or woman, reality TV star seems to have written a life story even if they have only been alive for a relatively short time! Justin Bieber was born in 1994 his autobiography was released in 2010! What does this say about the writer and the folk who are interested in his first 16 years (with apologies to any Bieber fans in the congregation)! I wonder if this book will be read and pored over in a 1,000 years' time. The first western autobiography is believed to be *Confessions* written by St Augustine of Hippo in the 4th century perhaps the most influential writer of the Christian era. A second autobiographical account book also titled *Confessions* was written by Jean-Jacques Rousseau the Genevan philosopher, writer, and composer of the 18th century. His political philosophy influenced the Enlightenment in France and across Europe, as well as aspects of the French Revolution and the overall development of modern political and educational thought.

I cite these two works because their dedications say much about the writers. Augustine gives glory to God, his opening quotation comes from the Book of Psalms: "Great thou art, and greatly to be praised." Rousseau however takes a different tack: he dedicated his book "to me, with the admiration I owe myself." The book opens with these lines: "I have entered upon a performance which is without example, whose accomplishment will have no imitator. I mean to present my fellow-mortals with a man in all the integrity of nature; and this man shall be myself." No shortage of self-esteem there!

The enlightenment was yet another movement in that inexorable shift away from faith in the divine towards faith in humanity; it was perhaps the beginning of modernity and today we can see the results. We might admire Augustine's humility, but Rousseau's language strikes us as more familiar. "To me, with the admiration I owe myself" is a dedication that would look right at home today on a Facebook page in the 21st century - a medium which has become the means by which we all become autobiographers!

Modern psychologists tell us the symptoms of narcissism are vanity; materialism; an inflated sense of one's own specialness or importance; antisocial behaviour; little interest in emotionally close relationships, along with a lack of empathy; exaggerated overconfidence; and a strong sense of entitlement. Sound like anyone you know? It is this issue of narcissism that is centre stage if we examine the Genesis story. Before leaving home this morning most of us would have stood at a vanity unit to shave, comb our hair or put on our make-up, they are not called vanity units for nothing! It is something which lies at the very heart of being human at least being a human sharing in the frailties of Adam and Eve – the very first narcissists and other echo from the Garden of Eden.

Last week we left the disciples on a bit of a high as it were. On Mount Tabor they saw the vision of the Transfigured Jesus in all his glorious divinity! Most of the titles we have seen over our season of revelation have described his otherness, my Son the beloved, Son of God, Word made flesh, Lamb of God, Emmanuel. But there were hints of something more earthy we heard Son of David, Son of Man - the title, incidentally that Jesus used of himself most frequently – seventy eight times in the gospels if you count them! Although some have tried we will never completely grasp Jesus' self-understanding, but I think in the title Son of Man Jesus was endeavouring to identify himself completely with humanity, with us!

The Orthodox have a doctrine called Theosis, divinisation, Irenaeus the 2nd Century Bishop wrote "God became what we are in order to make us what he is." Paul reminds us that a spark of the divine is within each of us 'For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.' This spark of divinity is the image of God within each one of us, we are special, unique, loved, adored. This spark constitutes our greatest dignity but also creates our biggest problems. This great gift sits uncomfortably within us; quoting Augustine again: 'you have made us for yourself Lord and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.' Yes we are restless, disquieted, it is only Jesus, who Paul reminds us today is the 'new' Adam, who can show us how we live out this specialness, uniqueness while we make peace with our limitations, frustrations, anonymity *and* create space for the uniqueness and specialness, limitations, frustrations, anonymity of everyone else's life. Modernity is not offering the skills and tools to achieve this balance, we increasingly turn away from the new Adam and we are falling increasingly into a world marred by the narcissism of the old.

From whence will we find the cure for this disease? Many argue, we need to implement reforms in parenting, the media, education, economic policy, and the tone of political and social life. But we need more - the virtue of humility is the real antidote. Humility is a distinctively Christian virtue, grounded in the doctrine of Christ's kenosis, his self-giving, self-emptying humility. This is not triumphalism, but simply a fact of history: Christianity was the leaven that shaped a more humble and humane culture; gave rise to the founding values of the western world; and, ultimately, prevented us from worshipping ourselves. The cure then? Lent...prayer, fasting and alms giving – old school. They are disciplines in which we turn away from ourselves, look beyond ourselves, and in all humility recognize our need of God. They are disciplines to dispel the insipid narcissism that surrounds us, the alternative is a culture descending deeper into the loud, crass, and aggressive cult of the self-worship that we see around us. I pray and hope that it doesn't. Amen.