

Only when we trust can we begin to obey

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

First Sunday in Lent (Year A) — 26 February 2023

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Genesis 2.15-17; 3.1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5.12-21; Matthew 4.1-11.

The hymn *Trust and Obey* has not found its way into my top ten! You might remember the chorus: "Trust and obey / For there's for no other way / To be happy in Jesus / But to trust and obey." When our new hymn book was published it was omitted, there might be a reason for that! It is a classic Victorian hymn but, despite my misgivings, it does speak of a great truth.

When I was preparing for ordination, I was told that the mark of me as a minister would be my obedience. Twenty-five years ago, things were, on the surface at least, a little simpler and I don't recall being troubled by this comment from the Director of Ordinands. We were living in a regional centre at the heart of a country diocese, my obedience was to the Bishop who was encouraging me and would have the last word on whether or not I would be ordained.

I enrolled at St Mark's around this time and my lecturers would send me great piles of things to read. There were familiar names like Colin Dundon and Scott Cowdell, among others, and along with the Bishop and the director of Ordinands and a whole raft of tutors, they shaped me. I enjoyed that time. When I look back on it now, I am very grateful to those folk. But now it all seems a little too simple. It was also about then that I got my first email address, I recall the dial up process to get online, the internet was in its infancy, and social media had not yet emerged—not for me at least. The digital age emerged and, as time has passed, I have changed, I have realised the complexity of our world and Church, the power of culture and information, and from there the question of obedience.

Today we experience some of the founding documents of a 'Judeo-Christian' anthropology—as distinct from a scientific one. We read of Adam, the original human, Jesus the new Adam and Paul who in this purple passage ties the two together. This passage from Paul's letter to the Romans might make you feel a little dizzy; that's because you have reached a highpoint in Paul's oratory, his rhetorical skill. The air's a little thin up there. We are looking at a grand vista spread out before us. Genesis one way, Matthew the other! In very simple terms, we experience the disobedience of humanity in one reading, the obedience of Jesus in the other and Paul's telling us of the results in the middle! That is a little too simple, but it's a good place to start. It seems that between these two grand narratives of disobedience and obedience is a great abyss, one that we cannot seem to deal with. Few, if any, of us are completely disobedient, even fewer are completely obedient, but our faith tells us that the abyss between these two states of being can be bridged. They are bridged on the one hand by our hope and trust and on the other by God's love.

The Genesis reading presents some real obstacles to us. This is mainly due to the burden placed on the text by years of interpretation. If we approach the text anew, we will discover that humankind is to care for the garden and in return it sustains humankind. But there are boundaries. We may not completely understand why, but crossing the boundaries is perilous. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil is a boundary marker, and humanity is seduced out of its proper role in the garden, it crosses the boundary. But rather than disobedient, I wonder if humanity is distrustful. God trusts those he has created, but it is not reciprocated. The psalmist has something to say about this in Psalm 32 today: we are offered instruction, wise counsel, but we are not coerced, we are asked to trust.

We have heard it said many times before that in our world today we suffer from a deficit of trust. It is not just used car salesmen whom we might single out but across the spectrum of church and state, across our institutions, legislatures, commerce, military, law, and our experts. It has become a political issue as we have grappled with the recent pandemic and with the problem of our climate—and potentially this lack of trust is having catastrophic circumstances. Is this not the theme of Genesis, the catastrophe of mistrust? But just as the church is distracted by the apple, we in our world are distracted by other issues. I wonder: does this not say something about our predicament today? As we are reminded in our series of studies on these readings by Dr Colin: this text sounds so modern. It could a narrative reflection on the crises of ecology, culture, poverty, and freedom.

Whilst I might be splitting hairs, I think that most of us can grasp something of the difference between obedience and trust. Obedience has a sense of law or regulation, potentially coercion. Trust is about relationship, and what we discover in the gospel, in these trials of Jesus, is not just his obedience but his trust; a trust that is the fruit of his relationship with God.

One of the reasons that we have a trust deficit in our community is because of the misuse of our institutions, our religions, our knowledge. That is what Jesus confronts in the wilderness. I wouldn't say this during a polite dinner party, but clearly Satan is at work in our world, dividing us, bringing discord and mistrust. We have seen it just this week in our own communion, spoiling our relationships.

Is the mark of you and me our obedience? I am wary to say 'no', but I am cautious because I am increasingly aware of the complexity of life. Yes, it is a part of Christian life, but I believe we are called to something much more. The cultural overlay of Lent, with its giving up chocolate or whatever rather takes away something of its true purpose, as one of our prayers says, 'to renew our trust in your Father's love.' This is the journey we have begun and it asks much of us. Two Sundays ago, we were on the Mount of the Beatitudes, we were being challenged. Jesus said to those gathered around him: 'When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.'

I have been reflecting on this as I plan my own Lenten journey. It struck me that I was to be more insightful, more aware of others, more trusting, more trustworthy, more reflective. Before we offer 'ourselves, our souls and bodies' in the Eucharist—an act of trust in God, do we need to turn to others place our trust in them be reconciled to them? To be reconciled involves trust, and it is only when we trust that we can begin to obey. Perhaps there is something in that old hymn after all. Amen.