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## CREATION TO NEW CREATION

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### LENTEN STUDIES

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#### YEAR A

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### “PILGRIMAGE: WHO RULES?” FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR A

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

#### **Genesis 2.15–17, 3.1–7**

<sup>15</sup>The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. <sup>16</sup>And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; <sup>17</sup>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.’

<sup>3</sup>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”?’ <sup>2</sup>The woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; <sup>3</sup>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.”’ <sup>4</sup>But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die; <sup>5</sup>for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>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.

The book of Genesis is a carefully crafted literary narrative about origins; about the cosmos, human beings, civilization, religious traditions and more. That is the shape it takes. It is not a scientific monograph, a modern history, sociology or anthropology. It is a literary event that takes on a journey using the different genre available to the

authors and editors to capture our imaginations and encourage us to ask questions and God and humans, that most fundamental question of all.

And that is where our passage takes us today. Both stories come from the second story of creation that begins in Genesis 2.4 and concentrates itself on exploring a limited space and time in the Garden of Eden. The big explosive picture of Genesis 1 now becomes the setting for an intense human drama that will turn everything upside down.

In the first creation story the human creature will live in God's world, with God's other creatures no matter how dangerous, on God's terms. That creation story ends in the praise of Sabbath because it is very good; the second sinks in the mire of alienation and despair.

### Till the garden 2.15–17

The first thing to notice is that the human is told to go and till a garden (see 2.5). The human is the product of the soil in this account (2.7) and will serve it (the meaning of 'till', see Genesis 12.6; Exodus 5.9; Exodus 4.23). The human will serve the earth as it depends on soil for life and livelihood. This view contrasts with the view stated in Genesis 1.26, 28 where the human beings have dominion over the earth. The grounds for this dominion lie in the creation of humans as not only animals but 'in God's image.' That is the nature of human authority; it is under God on God's terms.

'Dominion' does mean to rule over (Leviticus 25.43; Psalm 72.8). Some have used these ideas to grant humans unregulated and unlimited licence and power to exploit the creation for their own use. As the Bible story shows such human rule in any sphere can be either violent and destructive or benevolent and just. We know from our experience that power and authority are necessary to human life but are complex and messy in operation. To help us the Biblical writers are not frightened to put two perspectives in tension for us to meditate on, to find our place in the world and our responsibility in it.

God gives the humans a calling to tend and keep God's garden. God is prepared to entrust the garden of creation to the humans so that the human can share in God's creative work. God's first speech to humans does not mention God's place in the world; God sees the human as a co-worker in creation and not a rival or a possible upstart. God trusts the human creature in this special garden, His own making. This is the warrant for being in the garden.

Then God gives the humans a wide permission, and a wide range of freedom. They can eat of anything at all, even the tree of life (2.9). Everything is permitted (1 Corinthians 6.12; 10.23). Creation is for the sustaining of life.

In this light the prohibition does not seem repressive. There is no explanation given for the prohibition; it just is because that is the way human life is. It is the fact of the prohibition that counts and nothing else. It is the authority of the One who speaks that counts and the unqualified expectation of obedience that matters. And that requires unqualified trust in the One who speaks his Word on creation.

Human life becomes a balancing act between these three, calling, permission and prohibition. One without the others becomes perversion and thus destructive. In popular imagination the God of the Garden is only remembered as the one who prohibits.

*Questions:* Human authority and the power that flows from it are a constant in human life. What is Jesus' take on it Mark 10.35–45? Is God the great prohibitor for you? How do you see your calling in 'the garden'?

### **Did God say...? 3.1–7**

If 2.15–17 was Scene I in this drama this is Scene III (we skip Scene II and IV). What we read today is fragmentary; what sense can we make of it? The two scenes that precede this one leave us with the human vocation to till and keep the creation, with authority and boundaries in place to protect it and Scene II ends with a human community of men and women at one in covenant relation of solidarity and trust. There is no shame in the human social relationships depicted in in Scene II and in a society that lived by honour and shame this was the sign of harmony, equality, and wellbeing.

Now the scene is truly set. And the serpent comes on the scene. And the serpent appeals to the prohibition and warning of 2.17. In doing so the wild animal utterly distorts what God has said and thus sets up the false discussion to follow. It is important to see that the serpent is a literary device, a wild animal, a part of the garden and part of its tilling and keeping. The serpent is not the Satan or a phallic symbol or some principle of evil and death. It is a wild voice that introduces the first theological speech into the story. And what a bombshell that is.

The theological voice analyses the prohibition as though it were not a given but an option. This is talk to avoid the claims of God not serve him. God is an object, the serpent speaking of God in the third person. Neither human nor wild animal speak to God or with God but about God. The serpent gives a lecture on the sociology of law to relativise the rule of God.

More than that the serpent speaks directly to the warning "you shall die." This is not a threat in the original but a simple statement of the boundaries of existence and trust. Now in the voice of the serpent it becomes a catastrophic threat to human existence. Death not life becomes the primary human agenda. Shame has become the primary human social category. Harmony, equality and wellbeing are gone displaced by fear

and terror. Trust and obedience at every level of human life and relationships is broken into self-interest.

The serpent theology is conspiracy theology; God in conspiracy against the humans. This is a theology classroom and the humans practise theology rather than obedience. Their failure of theology and obedience is devastating. Focussed on self, shame and guilt there is no more talk of the garden and its care, their calling is neglected, the permission is perverted in the violation of the prohibition. It all sounds so modern. It could a narrative reflection on the crises of ecology, culture, poverty, and freedom.

If you have followed closely you will have noticed that the text is not interested in questions of the ‘human predicament’; questions of sin, death, origins of evil and the devil, sex and fall. We will have to look elsewhere to find answers for them and let this story speak for itself.

*Questions:* What role does trusting the Word of God and obeying it have in the Christian life? How can we subvert that trust and obedience?

### Psalm 32

Of David. A Maskil.

<sup>1</sup>Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,  
whose sin is covered.

<sup>2</sup>Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity,  
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

<sup>3</sup>While I kept silence, my body wasted away  
through my groaning all day long.

<sup>4</sup>For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;  
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.  
*Selah*

<sup>5</sup>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*

<sup>6</sup>Therefore let all who are faithful  
offer prayer to you;  
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters  
shall not reach them.

<sup>7</sup>You are a hiding-place for me;  
you preserve me from trouble;  
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.  
*Selah*

<sup>8</sup>I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;  
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

<sup>9</sup>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.

<sup>10</sup>Many are the torments of the wicked,  
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord.

<sup>11</sup>Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous,  
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

Psalm 32 must be one of the better-known Psalms. Its theme, the joy of forgiveness, strongly resonates with Christian theology and experience. It also recalls Psalm 1 with its “Happy are those...” beginning. Traditionally, Ps.32 has been called the second of the penitential psalms (6; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143).

### Joy of forgiveness 1–2

The Psalm begins with two beatitudes that recall Psalm 1. Happiness lies in the way of forgiveness. The psalm uses three words for sin: transgression denotes wilful rebellion, sin means to miss the mark and iniquity/guilt suggest the enduring, destructive effects of disobedience. This is Israel’s basic vocabulary for sin. Despite the psalm being about sin it is a song of thanksgiving and joy. That again characterises Israel’s understanding of sin and forgiveness.

Sin in the psalms is not about minor personal peccadilloes or trivial behaviour. It as portrayed in Genesis the act of “casting God out of God’s own garden” and taking control ourselves. It is about our actions to take control on our own authority to determine what is best for human life. It is taking authority to determine our own gods (goals) and the final end of creation and humanity. Sin is not moral: it is theological.

The consequences that flow from this are moral. They involve the exercise of power to determine our goals (our god’s goals). Justice, love, mercy, truth, faithfulness all come under the hammer and the poor and weak go the wall.

Trapped in our own cage of self will, deceit, and the hollow authority of autonomy we cannot rescue ourselves. To be released into the freedom of God’s love, justice, mercy, truth and faithfulness is perfect freedom.

*Questions:* What do you think freedom is? Think on the freedom of forgiveness.

### The tragedy of unconfessed sin 3–5

The psalmist’s life is characterised by all three and the results are very real, even physical (3–4). The psalmist’s silence, the human incapacity to confess to God and take responsibility for wrongdoing, is the real problem and it is the solution that sets free the healing power of forgiveness and restoration. Silence before God on these matters is rejection of grace. Disintegration is the result; the human being slowly unravels.

God's forgiveness on the other hand encompasses sin, transgression and guilt thus setting the recipient free to live once again; to integrate and bind the strands of life back into a whole (5). Human transparency in the presence of God is the key. We are so used to deceiving ourselves and others that it becomes a habit. The psalmist reminds us just how destructive a habit deceit is.

### Celebrate 6–7

The psalmist witnesses to God's surrounding him and encompassing him, as well as hiding him. After the release from sin and deceit the psalmist is free to pray and enjoy the presence of God in any situation whatever, no matter how dire (6–7). Notice how deeply relational and personal the psalm is. God is not an accountant doing theological or moral arithmetic but the very source of life itself reaching out to us and rejoicing in us.

*Questions:* Is this your experience of God?

### Teach us 8–9

It might be God or the psalmist who teaches in vss. 8–9 but both point to the learning process that must follow restoration. God will teach us how to live again if we are amenable. God will take us on afternoon walks in the cool of the day (as in that great story of Genesis 3) to teach us what our true end is. That is the only point of Christian spirituality, not simply an academic study, witnessing to the joy of freedom that forgiveness brings, entering into a restored and living relationship and learning to love again.

### Rejoice in the Lord 9–10

Human sin brings great torment to human life (10) but God's everlasting steadfast love surrounds the forgiven and gives great joy that is worth shouting about. Praise and worship are the best response to the new found freedom of forgiveness. We can only teach one another or witness to one another not from high moral ground but out of the humility appropriate to grace. We are set free; we do not set ourselves free. It is the divine love and steadfastness that surrounds and upholds us not some inner resource of our own.

*Questions:* What is your experience of sin? Does forgiveness make you shout for joy? What is your witness to others about the wonders of God's great love? How has this psalm contributed to your sense of what a Christian spiritual life is?

This psalm celebrates what is the very heart of the Christian tradition, God's grace and forgiveness that allows us to know true happiness. Yet we rarely take time to celebrate this pivotal act of daily grace. Why might that be and what can we do about it?

## Romans 5.12–21

### Adam and Christ

<sup>12</sup>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—<sup>13</sup>sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. <sup>14</sup>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.

<sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>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.

<sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>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. <sup>20</sup>But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, <sup>21</sup>so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

This is a tough, terse passage, but the theme is clear enough. The passage outlines the way in which the creator and covenanting God has successfully dealt with the problem of human sin and death, which is the theme of his next section of the epistle. This is a 'big picture' of ideas and the flow of ideas is not always clear. The thesis is clearly stated in 12, but is not taken up again until 18. Verses 13–17 are two asides in which Paul explains the issue of sin and death between Adam and Moses (13–14) and the imbalance between sin and grace (15–17), grace being much more abundant. Indeed, grace is superabundant, which is surprising in a world we live in: a world that seems hard, cruel and unfair. We have been taught to be suspicious of everything and that leads into the waters of despair. Sin and death are not the final answer; grace far exceeds them. Jesus Christ is the mediator of this grace through the justification of the sinner. The law cannot help us because it just helps us see how far we have gone and if we sin in knowledge of the law then our situation is worse than ever. We must ever look to the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

In reading this letter imagine Paul dictating to a secretary so the communication is really oral and not a polished work for publication. As in speech sentences sometimes remain unfinished or go in unexpected directions. There are no ways of correcting

such things as resources are limited to what is on hand. Further he expected the letter to be spoken in public and not read in private, except by very few.

### Compare and contrast 12

Paul starts his discussion with a reference to the Genesis 3 passage we have studied already. Paul like some of his contemporary Jewish commentators on Genesis 3 thinks that this passage reveals to us some important matters about the human condition and the God relationship.

Paul is fond of comparisons like this from the Hebrew Bible. He has used Abraham in the letter already to illuminate a Christian understanding and experience of faith. Now he turns to the subject of sin because he is looking to lay a foundation for his analysis of the Christian life which he finally gives in Romans 8. The discussion from 5.12 through chapter 7 allow that chapter to emerge with full force.

The comparison here is between the effects of Adam's actions and the Messiah's actions. Adam's action of disobedience, self-will and unrestrained autonomy and the desire for self-rule it displayed had the effect of spreading death (the consequence) and the continued disobedience to fulfil the desire. If you struggle with this verse let me share with you that most commentators do too. It has some syntactical and grammatical knots that are very hard to untie, perhaps the most difficult in Romans.

This little unfinished half sentence has been used to support a doctrine of original sin. Such a doctrine requires a great deal more evidence than this snippet can provide. But Paul does seem to say two things without constructing a theory to hold them together: humans die because of Adam's sin, but that is a just outcome because all have sinned. Humans do not die because of Adam's sin, but because of Adam's sin and their own.

Biological death means cessation of life, dissolution of personhood, separation from all who matter. That death has been there from the beginning of humanity and life on earth. Death as a metaphor of the effects of unbridled human autonomy is the terrifying portrayal of the disintegrating of human personhood when we take our stand over against God.

### First aside 13–14

Here he explains a puzzle that might get in the way. A long time passed between Adam and Moses, a time when there was no law. Now the law of Moses is important to Paul and he has to clear this point up for his hearers. Human beings went on sinning and dying between Adam and Moses. How come?

The sin of Adam was a transgression, a deliberate violation of God's Word in favour of self-rule and self-interest. The sins of the generations between Adam and Moses could not be like that as there was no law. Yet death reigned and sin was wreaking its

havoc on the human relationship with God. Paul goes no further with this aside, for this is all it is, and we are left with questions that remain unanswered.

One way to reflect on this is to remember that sin is theological not simply or only moral. Even though there was no Mosaic law human beings still claimed their autonomy, left God out of the equation, and went their own way making their own goals and gods as suited.

### Second aside 15–17

This little aside contrasts with Adam's lust for autonomy which trapped him in an iron cage that we have described above. He cannot release himself. The free gift of Christ is the very opposite. No longer having to try and justify ourselves from within the cage we can be free and that is the key to unlock us from our prison where our autonomy has landed us. It is the free act of Christ for us to put all things in the right (righteousness is a relational term not solely moral one). It is God's free gift to us so setting us free so that we exercise our true authority to be fully human in the presence of God, fully restored.

*Questions:* Christianity is intensely relational and personal (not private). God, ourselves and others interacting in God's love, justice, mercy and faithfulness. Is that your experience? Reflect on your answer. Where do you want to go from here?

### Matthew 4.1–11

<sup>1</sup>Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup>He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. <sup>3</sup>The tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’ <sup>4</sup>But he answered, ‘It is written,

“One does not live by bread alone,  
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” ’

<sup>5</sup>Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, <sup>6</sup>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.” ’

<sup>7</sup>Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written,

“Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” ’

<sup>8</sup>Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; <sup>9</sup>and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ <sup>10</sup>Jesus said to him,

‘Away with you, Satan! for it is written,  
“Worship the Lord your God,  
and serve only him.” ’

<sup>11</sup>Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

We read one or other version of the temptation stories each First Sunday in Lent and each has its own special insight. It is hardly surprising that in each account the moment of confrontation comes immediately after Jesus' great moment at baptism, a moment when the love and the calling of God are heard, that he should hear the voice that tells of another way: the way of suspicion, conspiracy and disobedience. Jesus' calling as the son and beloved are really put to the test. Once again, the Satan conducts a theological debate about calling, freedom and limits. Like the first humans Jesus is called to balance the three and the Satan tests at that very point. Notice how the themes of calling, permission and prohibition work their way through this passage as well as Genesis. A new creation promising a new freedom is signalled and immediately the prosecution of another case, one that will incarcerate its prisoners in decay and death, begins immediately.

This story, embedded deep in the Christian tradition long before Matthew put it in his account immediately slaps us in the face with a dose of reality. Everything about this story, everywhere, and in every time will be contested to the very end.

### Demonic

There has been a tendency in recent times to dismiss the demonic in accounts such as this. That is understandable when one listens to some accounts from some Christian preachers, for they are often full of nonsense. It is not in the least rational to dismiss it out of hand on the grounds that matter alone exists. That is a whole other philosophical debate.

There is no space to give a full account of this matter. I shall be treating the Satan as a creation of God and answerable to God. The Satan is not an eternal force of evil set over against God on equal terms but part of the created order that includes angels, and in scope, far exceeds the creation of humans and animals we read of in Genesis. The Satan is a prosecutor (that is what the word means) who does his work by framing a narrative of evidence in such a way that he convinces listener of the plausibility of his case. The other title, devil, means a slanderer and that should throw up a red flag for the reader. It links to ideas like deceiver, father of lies; being plausible is not the same as being truthful as any court on any day knows. Plausibility is often about self-serving.

We tend to interpret Satan as prosecutor against individuals, but the New Testament sometimes speaks in terms that imply a far more social and political activity. Writers like Paul speak of principalities and powers and many modern scholars link that to

political, cultural, and social life. In this understanding the prosecutor pursues his case against/for human beings using the might of politics and other social and cultural institutions, including religious ones. So, lurking in the background of the ideas surrounding the Satan is power (without authority) to bring humanity undone. Never forget the politics when we read the New Testament; after all, both the term Messiah and Son of God are loaded with political weight (change and kingship).

### **Interpretation**

Over the long history of the interpretation of this pivotal text three themes have emerged. The first is that the story of Jesus' tempting recalls the period of Israel's time in the wilderness (40 years) after the Exodus. Jesus' use of Deuteronomy suggests the same. This is sometimes called a salvation historical view because it binds the temptation story into the whole plan of God's salvation for Israel and the gentiles.

The second is that this story probes the understanding of Jesus' Messiahship against contemporary political, militaristic, or religious interpretations. It reveals a testing of who Jesus is and what his place in the Divine plan is.

The third is that this story is given to teach tested disciples how to defeat the plausible Satanic narrative that proposes different answers to those proposed in the account. That is how it has often been used (perhaps mostly) in church life and is likely the one we know best.

We will take account of all three lines as they emerge in the story and test the balance of the three.

Now let's turn to the only thing that matters, the temptation stories.

### **Food for yourself 2–4**

The setting for the story is Jesus preparing himself for the ministry by fasting. The Spirit has taken him there, the very same Spirit of his baptism, the same Spirit of the creation now pours forth in and through Jesus the re-creation of human beings in God's love. That Spirit will burn away the chaff of our lives by the same love and grace that created the cosmos.

If you want a meditation on this theme read Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor in which the Cardinal Grand Inquisitor addresses the present Jesus. The cardinal has had Jesus arrested because he fears the way in which love and power flow from Jesus and is affecting the crowd. He contends that Jesus' promise of freedom is too much for people and that humans are too lawless and simple to appreciate what it might mean to live free of the fear of death (remember the explanation about the idea of death as metaphor given above).

Once more we are back in the Garden of Eden. Who has authority here? The created order is under the authority of God and for God to tend not for humans or the Satan to exploit for their own advantage. The Voice of God alone matters.

Jesus is tempted to use the implied authority of the title Son of God (Adam, the king) to exploit the created order for his own ends. The narrative is plausible. It is another version of the story of Eden. True authority draws its power from the true narrative of God's Speech

*Questions:* What authority do you listen to? Do you listen for the Speech of God?

### **Something spectacular (become a religious superstar) 5–7**

The scene moves to the Temple in Jerusalem, the centre of religious power, undergirded by local and Roman political and economic power. Once again the temptation is for Jesus to use the implied authority of his title Son of God to act independently of God's Word and for his own benefit. In this case he might win the crowds over to his superstar act and avoid the cross. The Satan warrants his argument like a good lawyer with a quote from Psalm 91.11–12 which sounds plausible (but not true). For the Satan God is a dial-up help service, a servant of the human whim (remember Adam in the Garden) and under human authority.

Not so says Jesus. To tempt God is to consider God to be at my bidding, a very dangerous presumption for a human being to make.

Jesus' vocation, which we disciples are called to follow, is to be a truly human being, to be God's person, a servant to the world and to other people. No religious tricks here, just servanthood and the way of the cross.

*Questions:* What do think being a human being might look like?

### **Naked ambition and power 8–11**

This time the Satan is breathtaking in his effrontery. He takes Jesus to very high mountain and shows him the glory and power of the kingdoms of the world.

Mountains have special place in Matthew as places of revelation (e.g. Matthew 5.1) and they recall the great traditions of God's revelation to Moses (see Exodus 19, Deuteronomy 34.1–4). This shameless piece of spin and deceit reveals what the first two temptations have been about; the connection between worship and power. 'Forget God, look to me where real power lies,' says the Satan.

Jesus meets the Satan's arguments with scripture (Deuteronomy 6.13) and exposes the falsity of the Satan's theology of disobedience and conspiracy. Jesus' takes as his spiritual, theological and political guide, Exodus 20.3–5.

You shall have no other Gods before me. You shall not make for yourself and idol... You shall not bow down to them or worship them.

This is the core of the matter. Politics as it practised is about worship and sacrifice to false gods. Jesus will call into being a people for whom the only sacrifice is a cross and the only worship is reserved for the crucified God.

I refer you to Dostoevsky again. The cardinal blames Jesus for rejecting this last great gift of the Satan. He says “We took Rome and the sword of Caesar from him (Satan), and proclaimed ourselves sole rulers of the earth, though we have not yet succeeded in bringing our cause to its full conclusion.” Had Jesus accepted the last gift then he could have given humankind what it seeks, “Someone to bow down to, someone to take over his conscience and a means for uniting everyone into a common, concordant, and incontestable anthill...”

As the cardinal rightly says, “And so we took Caesar’s sword, and in taking it, of course, we rejected you and followed him.”

*Questions:* What forms does rejection of Jesus take today? How might I reject Jesus? How can we reject Jesus in matters of power and knowing what is best for others?

Jesus is committed to the way of the cross and he will face all kinds of temptations in his life to deflect him from that way; his disciples, his opponents and others. All the time he commits to his calling and lives in the freedom God has given him. In this he is our example.

*Questions:* Sometimes we speak of being Christlike. How does this passage help us to understand what this means for us?