

St. Ninian's Parish Church

Sunday 1st March 2020

Genesis 2: 15 – 17, 3: 1 – 7; Matthew 4: 1 - 11

'Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they discovered that they were naked; so they stitched fig-leaves together and made themselves loincloths.'

What does that sound like to you? For many Christians through the centuries it has sounded like two people who have fallen down. 'Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they discovered that they were naked; so they stitched fig-leaves together and made themselves loincloths,' is the climax of the story at the beginning of the Book of Genesis that lead to Adam and Eve being expelled by their creator from their home in the Garden of Eden.

That expulsion has sounded to many like a fall from grace, so much so that in Christian theology it is not just a fall from grace, but *the Fall*, with a capital 'F'. Christians have believed that this Fall caused a separation from God, brought death and sin into the world, and consequently the need for a Saviour, Jesus Christ, to repair the rift between people and God, to redeem sin, and to restore life.

But, stepping outside the realms of traditional Christian theology for a moment, what does this sentence sound like to you, 'Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they discovered that they were naked; so they stitched fig-leaves together and made themselves loincloths'?

To me, it doesn't sound like a description of two people falling down, but of two people growing up; their eyes were opened, they discovered they were naked, they made themselves loincloths, is more like a description of the transformation and feelings of embarrassment that people encounter with puberty than a description of an encounter with a snake that tricks you into doing something that you shouldn't be doing.

The whole of the creation story about Adam and Eve in the second chapter of the book of Genesis can be read this way, as a story about growing up rather than as a story about falling down. In the story, God is a parent who creates people out of the substance of the earth, who builds for them a home to live in, where they live innocent lives with him their parent.

But, like all children Adam and Eve can't stay at home for ever. Not only are they curious about the world around them, but that world breaks in to their safe and secure home to tempt them to disobey their parent, and to leave home. It isn't just a pull from the outside that causes the separation from God, there's a push from within as well. As much as God loves his children, when the time comes for them to leave, he has to encourage them to go and make their own way in the world. He bars the way back - turns their bedroom in to a spare room, downsizes to a property with no room for the kids.

The creation story in Genesis chapter two is a story that is as much anthropological as it is theological. It is not just a story about God and the nature of God's world, it is as much a story about people and the nature of their existence. In Genesis God is a creator, a parent, a Father, who is a part of our lives, but human beings are also themselves grown adults who have to make their own way in this world.

Having said that, the Adam and Eve story is not just about the way human beings have to grow up and make their own way in this world as sexual beings, people who are aware of their nakedness, and people who will share their lives together as wives and husbands as Adam and Eve do.

If that growing-up moment is the apex of the story, then the heart of the story is connected to the traditional theology of the Fall. The event that transforms Adam and Eve's relationship with each other and their relationship with God is their involvement with the tree in the middle of the garden. Eve says to the serpent, 'We may eat the fruit of any tree in the garden, except for the tree in the middle of the garden.' The fruit of that tree is the knowledge of good and evil.

Whereas puberty might be a one-off event that marks a significant step in the life of a human being growing up, the knowledge of good and evil is an ongoing learning process that starts from a very early age, and which every mature adult in this world needs to learn about in order to live well.

In the Book of Genesis what makes human beings unique is their self-awareness of their sexuality, and their knowledge of good and evil. It is their knowledge of good and evil in particular that sets them apart. As the serpent says, 'God knows that as soon as you eat of the tree in the middle of the garden, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like gods knowing both good and evil.'

Even in the first chapter of Genesis, when God creates the universe and the world and all that lives on it in six days, there is a hint there that unlike everything else, there is something morally compromised about human beings. Whereas throughout the creative process God looked at each stage at the end of each day and declares that his creation is good, on the sixth day after he has created human beings, his declaration of goodness is slightly ambivalent. Instead of specifically referencing human beings as good like he had done on the other days, on this sixth day after the creation of human beings, God makes a general reference to all that he had made, declaring it to be very good. If you were that first human, you might feel a little left out.

The creation stories in the book of Genesis in chapters one and two are not so much stories focused on God that seek to explain how the universe, the world and life found its existence. They are stories that say something about the nature of human beings and what sets us apart from the rest of creation. That thing that makes us what we are when we are mature fully-grown adults is knowledge in the form of self-awareness; a self-awareness of our sexuality, and most importantly - and most problematically - a knowledge of good and evil.

When seen from the perspective of people acquiring the knowledge of good and evil, the expulsion from the Garden story is not be so much a story of God helping people on their way in life with a gentle push as his children reach puberty, as much as a story of an angry God who recognising that his children have acquired the ability to knowingly commit evil tells them to get out of his sight. From that perspective, that is very much a fall from grace.

The rest of the Bible is an unwinding of the consequences of these two things in the lives of human beings; the consequences of our self-awareness of our sexuality and its place in our relationships with each other, and the consequences of our ability to knowingly do good and evil. The drama in the Bible, and in our lives, revolves around our sexuality. The problem that the Bible sets out to solve, the thing that is broken that needs fixing, is our knowledge of good and evil, our capacity to not only do good, but to do evil.

For Christians the response to this particular problem about how we are to live well in this world when we have knowledge of both good and evil is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The drama at the heart of his life, death and resurrection is over which one of these, good or evil, will triumph over the other? Will it be good that wins out or evil?

Over the course of this season of Lent it will appear that evil is going to win the day, that it will be the dominant force in this world triumphing over any attempt we might make to be good people. God enters the world as Jesus Christ, a person like we are, resists the temptations we give in to, and tries to live in this world as the person that Adam and Eve were meant to be.

Along the way he shows what it is we need to do to resist evil. He shows us the faithfulness we need to stay on the narrow road. He demonstrates what powers we have to overcome to ensure that the good inside of us dominates the evil. But, then at the end of the Lenten journey, in Jerusalem it will seem that all is lost, that there is no power in our goodness that can defeat evil, for the evil will crucify him; death will triumph.

As food for this journey let us now share in the life of Jesus Christ in bread and wine. For it is in doing this that we commit our lives to him, commit our fate to his fate. In breaking bread, we acknowledge that we are broken people, longing to be whole. In drinking wine, we acknowledge that his blood was spilled for us so that we might know the truth even when all seems lost.

We know that Easter follows the crucifixion, but for this season of Lent we are not called to examine the nature of the victory, but to engage in the struggle. This world remains broken, and in it we can only live as mature grown-up adults if we join together as the body of Jesus Christ sharing communion with him and with one another recognising that we have fallen, but striving continually, with his help, to stand up together.