

Exodus 24. 12-18

2 Peter 1. 16-21

Matthew 17. 1-9

You probably have an impression of the story of that garden East of Eden and the goings-on there with God and Adam and Eve and the fruit of that problematic tree. An impression we were all given about what it all means – the story of the Fall as it's come to be called - and the fallout from it. The whole problem of sin and redemption and the human condition and separation from God.

Over a number of years I have come to conclusion that it is maybe the most abused and misunderstood story in the history of the world. For me the crux of the story is – not so much the issue of sin, sin is never mentioned – but the desire to think we can be like God – the notion being that God knows the difference between good and evil. And that eating of the fruit will make us like God. I think the story is seeking to address the religious tendency of humans to get inflated to the extent that they think they can speak on God's behalf. The wise old ones who compiled the canon of the Hebrew scriptures placed this story at the beginning because the fundamental human religious delusion to speak in the name of God.

The suggestion is that God knows the difference between good and evil. And that knowing the difference between these is important; even, a divine attribute. Don't we all want to know, so we can be on the side of the right; or know who is not..

Michael East pointed out to me last week that there was probably a dualism in Judaism that had crept into Judaism's world view under influence from the Persian empire, maybe 5 or 6 centuries before Jesus. A dualistic world view is one which understands the world to be some kind of battle, a struggle between good and evil, light and dark, the good and the bad – and by extension ones like us, and ones not like us; the insiders and the outsiders. Religious people in particular seem to like these kind of boundaries – lapsing too easily into extreme forms of boundary setting in the name of their God.

This extreme, bristling religious world is the world Jesus occupied; the stories of Jesus' engagements with the religious leaders of his time – pharisees and scribes, Sadducees and other religious elite - usually involved some argy-bargy around them being right and Jesus being wrong. *By what authority*, often was the preface to some kind of challenge to Jesus.

In the Garden we are told Eve and Adam strive to be like God

But how might humans speak of God with honesty and integrity; in a way that hints at nature of God; speaks of God with humility and wonder. This question goes to the heart of the church's affirmation about Jesus, maybe expressed most sublimely in the words of Paul to the Colossians from our call to worship:

*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation;
for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, ...
For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,*

The day we mark in the church year today – as we conclude the season of Epiphany this Sunday and then commence Lent next week – is this Sunday of the Transfiguration of Jesus. In each of the gospels it is the pivotal event; the action pivots from Jesus' ministry and the giving of his teaching and he turns his face to Jerusalem and the grisly events that take place there. Mark says that after the moment of transfiguration, Jesus turns his face to Jerusalem with a kind of grim determination: *They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid.*

This turning toward Jerusalem takes place after the transfiguration; something happens in this conversation between Moses, Elijah and Jesus which galvanises Jesus' knowledge that he will go to the cross. Luke tells us that Moses and Elijah speak with Jesus about the exodus which he is about to accomplish in Jerusalem. Our bibles translate the word into departure – as though he is going to some kind of platform 9¾. But the notion of the exodus Jesus is about to accomplish speaks of liberation, of freedom and of course ties the Jesus story back into the Moses story, the exodus from slavery. If you recall as we have read the Sermon on the Mount in the last few weeks, Jesus says he has come, not to do away with the law, but to fulfill it. So this meeting between the law and the prophets is central to this fulfillment.

While scholars are clear that the 2nd letter of Peter is probably not by him, it is a letter echoing, or passing on Peter's teaching and his experience. It was a common thing in the ancient world for a writer to attribute their work to a famous teacher, or sage or mystic. It's a notion which seems quite unacceptable to us, but it was a respected and legitimate practice at that time. So this letter is probably not by Peter but bears his name. I'll read it again:

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place.

Moses meets Jesus on the mountain as embodiment of the law given to God's people; Elijah meets Jesus on the mountain as embodiment of the call of the prophets to God's justice and mercy. And Peter says of this transfiguring gathering: *So, we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed.*

In the move towards Union of the churches which came together to form the Uniting Church in 1977 the dialogue about Union was around a document that we call the Basis of Union. Many of the documents which were drawn up to constitute churches through history were often what you might call doctrinal documents; documents like the Westminster Confession or the Heidelberg Catechism. The Heidelberg Catechism starts on the cheery note of focussing on *Our Sin and Misery*. Many of these Confessions or Catechisms quote scripture – in a kind of proof text manner - as the basis of their denominational identity and unity. And they are often explicit about what they are not or what they are against. Last weekend the General Synod of the Lutheran Church of Australia for the fifth or sixth time debated the question of the ordination of women. Regrettably the proposal to ordain women failed yet again. They explicitly disallow the ordination

of women in their foundational document. And many foundational documents place scripture before God; before Jesus.

But the uniting churches took their guiding motivation from the affirmation that Jesus is the Word of God who has revealed God to the world; has shown us God's face and confirmed to us God's nature. The BoU affirms the utter primacy and centrality of Jesus: *The Church as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit confesses Jesus as Lord over its own life; it also confesses that Jesus is Head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, of a new humanity.*

It is at this moment of the transfiguration as Jesus meets with Moses, as embodiment of the law, and Elijah, as embodiment of the prophets, that we can say that Jesus is head over all things, the beginning of a new creation. As a result of this vision the letter of Peter can say with confidence and humble clarity: *So, we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed.* This is the church's affirmation; and it is our delight.

Sal Douglas, who I quoted a few weeks ago, says in her book, *the Church as Salt*, that the church is not called to be the purity police; wagging the finger about what is right and what is wrong. Rather the call of the church is to be the face of Jesus to the world. This is a task of humility and wonder. A task of *being* mercy and compassion and proclaiming God's mercy and compassion for all.

From the moment of the transfiguration Jesus sets off to Jerusalem and it is at this point in the gospels that he says: *if any would be my disciples, let them take up their cross and follow me.* As we conclude the Season of Epiphany today and begin Lent next week we are called to walk this path through death to life. May God grant us grace as we continue on Jesus' way.

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