

Genesis 2. 15-17, 3. 1-7

Romans 5. 12-19

Matthew 4. 11

Last week I had not, at that stage, given any attention to the readings for Lent. I read though all of Lent's readings this week, to find that today is set that episode from that garden, east of Eden. And the story of the Fall, as it has come to be called, and the fallout from it. We have been told in no uncertain terms what this story is all about and that's all we need to know. The NRSV even heads the section we have read "The first sin and its punishment". End of story; that's all we need to know – is the implication.

What I said, by way of introduction, last week is that this story of the problematic garden is what we know as a myth. A myth is a form of truth bearing literature. We might say that parables are also a form of truth-bearing literature. The word myth has in our own time, though, come to be synonymous with misconception, fallacy, untruth, fabrication, falsehood, telling a whopper; or maybe our own Australian colloquial: a Furphy. But a myth as a form of literature is a truth bearing tale. I don't know the source of this saying; I recall it came from the mouth of a child who said that a myth is a story that is true on the inside, but not on the outside.

So, when we are told that this is what a story means we don't have to look inside; we are just expected that we will be content with the outside meaning – that someone else gives us. The point about myths is that the wise ones who dreamt them up, developed them and passed them on as a means to provoke us to think about the big questions, about our human condition. We are meant to probe the story and to probe our own situation; our own questions. It's not enough to to be given the outside meaning of the story. We have to probe the inside of the story for it to yield truth for us.

So because this story is a myth, the happenings in the Garden of Eden are not history; they are not an eye-witness account of a real man and real woman in a real garden somewhere, East of Eden. Although there are indications of real places as the story unfolds – real rivers are named. When the text says: *And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed* – it is as though it is a way of saying: *once upon a time*.

For our purposes today I want say one thing about the story; and that's about the response of the fig leaf. To provoke us to begin to think about the fig leaf I wanted to show you a photo of children playing naked on the beach. And ask you what do you feel when you see children playing completely unself-consciously, maybe clothed, maybe not clothed, on the beach. I couldn't find such a photo; and if I did I might have the AFP knocking on my door. But I can recall the sight of my own children playing naked with complete abandon on the beach. They didn't need my oversight, my negotiating between them, me giving them suggestions for what they might do, or fitting them out with wetsuits or rashies and flippers and boogie boards. The sand, the water, sticks, the rocks, the waves were all enough to enable a world of abandoned, unself-conscious creativity. As though they were communing with the very source of life itself. Do you know that experience.

So, as the man of dust Adam – which is what the name Adama in the Hebrew means – and the woman discover they are naked – they become self-conscious. They realise they are naked. But

it's not about naked bodies or sex or sin – this knowledge of being naked is about self-consciousness. They expected the knowledge of good and evil – but they got knowledge of themselves and shame with it. So, they hide from this one with whom they were previously utterly unselfconscious – with whom they used to walk in the garden in the cool of the evening. And they cover themselves with fig leaves.

Now in the Hebrew scriptures the fig tree is used as an image of the law; a metaphor for the law. So, the man and the woman cover their shame with the law. Because, well, they now know the difference between good and evil. But they are also condemned by this knowledge. What we believe the law does is that it enables us to distinguish between good and evil but with it comes this terrible self-knowledge too. Paul explores this terrible tension in chapter 7 of the letter to the Romans: *So, I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.*

Of course, laws allow us, enables us to live peaceably and safely alongside each other. But we are not talking about the legal statutes of the state of Victoria in the Commonwealth of Australia but law which is construed in a way that says that these laws are God's laws; these laws have been written by and handed to us by God. And so we will be able to be justified by following these laws, by being god. And this will protect us from the shame, the self-consciousness, the sense of incompleteness which seems to be an inescapable part of our human condition. The fig leaf of the law will cover us from the shame. From the sense of existential separation – our loss of innocence - which is too often our human experience. But they don't; and this is what Paul argues. But grace will release us from this. He continues in chapter 7: *Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

Paul writes to the Romans: *because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one.* If we think in historical terms about Adam we can say, yes this is true, that through Adam's action the sense of separation from God entered into human experience – that's the way this myth portrays the eternal human predicament. And that through this action on the part of Adam that sin and death enter into human experience. Nevertheless, Genesis, itself, says nothing about sin.

The word sin comes to us from the Greek word *hamartia*. Now the meaning of this word, the word which is translated for us as sin, means to fall short of; it's a recognition that there is a gap, a lack, a self-knowledge that something is not quite right, something is incomplete, something of which we feel self-conscious, ashamed, separated from those with whom we should be most intimate. And we make judgements about this space, this gap, this falling short. It is in a sense the gap into which our conscience speaks.

Now the church over a long period of time has given great attention to sinful action; labelled it, wagged the finger at it, shouted and pulpit-thumped about it. To no great avail, I would say. It's not been an approach which has been very liberating for people. But I think sin is both the action – or inaction – and the knowledge of the action. It is the action and the knowledge of it. The knowledge of falling short. I think this Genesis story is about the knowledge. The serpent cons Eve into believing she will have knowledge of good and evil; what she ends up with is terrible self-knowledge which casts her and Adama out from innocence and intimacy with each other and God.

Paul writes: *For the judgement following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. 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.*

Paul here is not describing some kind of cosmic transactions performed by Adam and Jesus Christ but what he is hinting at is some kind of mystery available to us in the very nature of life. The story of that garden, east of Eden, was the story that was available to Paul to tell the story of the nature of the human predicament. The Jews had told a story in this particular way. But Paul – a devout Jewish zealot - had discovered in his own life a story in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus – and through his own persecution of Jesus and then liberation from his own religious extremism – that there was grace to be discovered in the world also – in the way and the pattern of Jesus. He discovered grace and abandoned legalism – or grace found in Jesus Christ discovered him.

I won't say much about the testing in the wilderness of Jesus. But this account of his testing is the launching point for the forty days of Lent. Jesus is in the wilderness for forty days – and is tested, as Moses is on the mountain for forty days – receiving the law; as Israel is in the wilderness for forty years – and is tested. The echo between the Genesis story and the wilderness story are the questions which are put – by the serpent and by the tempter – as Matthew calls him. The serpent says to Eve: did God say? The tempter says to Jesus: If you are; if you are the Son of God. A doubt is sown. A gap grows. Shame and uncertainty enter in and risk separation from God.

So, we set off on our way to mark the events of the passion, to celebrate the paschal mystery which is Easter and how Jesus' journey through death to life paves the way for us. This is a life giving mystery which is available for us and which we celebrate together; we encourage and support and care for each other along this way as we seek the life-giving grace of God for ourselves and others. May God shine the divine grace and liberation on us this Lent.

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