

LENT – AN INVITATION TO COME HOME

Sermon Lent 1, 5th March 2017

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

There's a wonderful kind of contrast in today's readings. On the one hand you get Adam and Eve succumbing to temptation, though not without a bit of a struggle; and on the other Jesus winning out over temptation, although again not without struggle.

And what fascinates me is that in both cases the response offered to Satan is to quote what God has said. Eve: "God said: you shall not eat of the fruit of the tree." Jesus: "You shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." The difference is that Jesus is absolutely secure in that knowledge, but Eve is not.

So the demon of doubt coils itself around Eve's heart in a scene straight out of Disney's "Jungle Book", as Ka coils himself tight around Mowgli and sings "Trust in me", hypnotising him all the while. And this is exactly what Satan does, first of all insinuating doubt: Did God say? Are you sure? And then flatly contradicting God: You will not die! And finally going in for the kill: God knows you will be like him if you eat this fruit.

Whatever doubts might have been in Eve's mind before, doubts about herself or doubts about God, Satan plays on them masterfully. Is this the truth or just some great divine con? Maybe God hates me or just wants to keep me ignorant like a slave. Is God just the Wizard of Oz? You know, you follow life's Yellow Brick Road with all its perils only to discover the Great Wizard Of Oz is just a little man hiding behind a curtain, bossing people around through a glorified megaphone.

So having been given everything, Eve and Adam now feel that maybe God's holding out on them. And so they eat, and in so doing they initiate the first in an endless web of doubts and sins and suspicions and hatreds that echoes in us to this day. Does God love me? Who's to blame for the way my life's turned out? Why did I ever taste the sour apple of all those things I regret? - the things I've done, and the things done to me.

And from the moment Satan goes slithering off into the long grass, his work done, you see everything unravelling. Love and sex arouse a shame not planted in them by God. God calls to them as he always did, and they hide. God asks them to tell their story and Adam blames Eve. In the Old Testament according to Spike Milligan, Adam says: "The woman gave me and I did eat the apple", going on to add: "A Granny Smith".

But whatever the fruit, the tragedy is here to stay until or unless a new Adam shows us the way back – and not so much the way back to a mythical paradise, but the way back to trust.

There is a wonderful, terrible painting in Florence, one of the most ground-breaking works of the early Renaissance by a painter called Masaccio, of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden. There is the angel, clothed in red, fiery sword in hand

pointing them away from paradise lost towards a desert which Adam will only make fruitful by the sweat of his brow and where Eve will bear her children in pain. It's a ground-breaking painting because it shows Adam and Eve displaying human emotion in a way that is more raw than their actual, physical nakedness. A later ruler of Florence had fig leaves painted over a nudity he clearly found shocking, but far more shocking is the anguish of Adam and Eve over what they have lost.

Eve's face is a harrowing mask of tragedy, Adam hides his face in his hands. They are like children overwhelmed by fear, and they are us – a famous prayer to Our Lady refers to us as “poor banished children of Eve” and such we are.



Eve's anguish and Adam's hopelessness: these are the faces we wear when we're overwhelmed with tragedy, whether it's our own or tragedies we see around the world. We know how vulnerable we all are. A friend whose young brother died in an accident told me through his tears – we all just hang on a gossamer thread, don't we? And we do.

To which our response could be just the response that Job's comforters in the end urged on Job because they couldn't make any sense of all his sufferings: “Oh Job, just curse God and die!” In other words let that seed of doubt planted by Satan have the last word because this life makes no sense at all.

And neither it does until God himself joins us in it. This is what's happening in the wilderness. In hunger and thirst, in pain and doubt he joins with us. He follows Adam and Eve into this very wilderness and bring them home – and us.

Is he actually tempted? Of course he is. But the strength of Jesus lies in that scene which is the immediate prelude to this driving into the wilderness: his baptism at the Jordan river that voice of God he hears, saying “You are my beloved”. This is the strength that will carry him way beyond what Satan does here, to Gethsemane – with all its anguish and doubt, to the Cross with all its abandonment, until with his last breath he says: “Father, into thy hands”. In the final moment our new Adam has nothing but trust: “Father”.

In that desert place, when I feel like howling like Eve, or hiding like Adam, when I think I'm finished, abandoned and lost, then the strength of Jesus can be our strength. Who am I? Who *am* I in this wonderful, terrible world as it is? I'm the beloved. Lent is for rediscovering hope and trust. Lent is for coming home.