



All Saints' Marseille

Sermon

Sunday, 1st March 2020

First Sunday of Lent

Year A: Genesis 2.15-17; 3.1-7; Romans 5.12-19; Matthew 4.1-11

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

I once had dinner with someone I didn't know well, who half way through the meal said: 'Complete this sentence: everything would have been different if...'
It was an intriguing question. We all have moments in our lives when our world turns, and our future moves in one direction rather than another, for better or for worse. I wonder what your moments have been.

Our reading from Genesis is one of the best-known scenes in the Bible. In theological circles it often prompts a discussion of the doctrine of original sin, which may be interesting to theologians but tends not to trouble most people as they go about their daily lives. Yet there is profound psychological and social truth in the idea that so often we do not feel free. People often feel constrained to do, and to be, less than they would wish, and we are all born into webs of relationships, some of them damaging, that dictate our choices. What has been called this 'depressing little scene' of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden plays out over and over again through human history. 'It wasn't me, it was her.' 'It wasn't my fault, it was that thing.' 'I'm not responsible, it's because of what's been done to me.' 'I was only obeying orders.'



Yet we do have agency. We have choices. The psychologist Victor Frankl was once asked how he had survived mentally while interned at Auschwitz during the Second World War. He replied: ‘Between the stimulus and the response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.’ He was saying that it is possible to control our reactions, even in extreme circumstances.

We have choices. We are capable of something better than we often manage – capable of a response of compassion and generosity that is so beautiful that it’s as if it comes from beyond us. Lifting us out of our self-absorption and connecting us to one another and the creation in ways that can surprise those around us, even ourselves. It’s the response of unconditional love. You see it in times of crisis when people perform acts of goodness and generosity. You see it when people place themselves in danger to save others. For Christians, it speaks of the notion that we are ‘made in the image of God’.

Paul, in today’s passage from his Letter to the Romans, suggests that Adam’s response in the Garden of Eden opens up the possibility of sin to all of us. Sadly, we often use our choices selfishly and stupidly, as Adam did. More importantly, though, Paul is saying that God in Christ is at work to give us back our freedom.

‘Between the stimulus and the response there is a space.’ In his temptations in the wilderness Jesus offers us guidance how to use that space well. Immediately after his baptism, when he received the affirmation: ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased’, Jesus goes into the wilderness, ‘led by the Spirit’. Creating time and space to respond to the promptings of God. Working out what it means for him to live into the promise he has discerned. To be tested.

Matthew's hearers would have understood the reference to the wilderness as a place of testing. The ancient Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years



before entering the promised land. In the Jewish mystic tradition, the number forty is associated with preparation for transformative change. Moses went up on Mount Sinai for forty days and forty nights. Jesus was in the wilderness, fasting for forty days and forty nights. Like Moses, this is one through whom God's purposes will be revealed. More than Moses, this is the one in whom they will be embodied.

There is more than one way in which we can reflect on the temptations of Jesus.

One commentator has noted that what Jesus faced in the wilderness were the temptations that would snap at his heels throughout his ministry - the temptation to focus on earthly needs rather than their heavenly roots, the temptation to be spectacular rather than consistent, the temptation to take short cuts rather than to put God first in everything. The fact that he was having to deal with these temptations throughout his life is illustrated in the battle he still had with them in Gethsemane.¹

Another way of reflecting on the temptations of Jesus is to notice that they are also the temptations of illusion. If Jesus were to approach things in one way, he would be giving in to illusion. If, however, he remains faithful to God, fixed on God and trusting in God's faithfulness, he will be truly God's Son. The tempter offers him prosperity, security and power - all the kingdoms of the world, even though the tempter is in no position to deliver them. Jesus, in reply, mines the wisdom of the Scriptures and asserts instead that everything comes from God, on whom we wholly depend. When the tempter offers Jesus power in exchange for worship, the tempter betrays his own desire. He longs to be God or, at least, to have what he imagines God has, because the tempter is as taken in by his own illusions as are Adam and Eve. The tempter lives in a world of illusions, longing

¹ John Pritchard, *Reflections for Sundays*, Church House Publishing (2016), p 87.



to be what he is not, hating what he sees as his own incompleteness, just as he persuades Adam and Eve to hate theirs. Only Jesus is content to be what he is, God's beloved Son. In Romans, Paul writes of the destructive effect of living in a world of illusions, and how what breaks through the web of deceit, what breaks through the anxiety and determination to have what we think we deserve, is God's own self-gift. In the world of illusions there is nothing about giving yourself away out of love. And so in Christ, Paul says, the illusions of sin come to an end.

Letting go of illusions is hard. But when we encounter the gracious, self-giving God whom Jesus knew so intimately as to call *Abba*, Father, then by wonderful irony we find that we already are what we have longed to be: precious and made in his image. We are not incomplete after all. We are whole. Freed from the illusion of lack.²

As Christians, we already have what we need to find happiness in God's creation. We are adopted as God's children through our baptism. We are accepted, loved. All God longs for is that we come back to him when we go astray. Some of you will know the painting by Rembrandt called *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. If you have never seen it, may I encourage you to Google it. It is a beautiful portrait of forgiveness, a parent enfolding a child – a grown-up child – in arms of love and compassion. It is a good image to keep beside us through Lent, a focus for prayer and reflection as we contemplate it. This is the God we are dealing with – running towards us, putting arms round us and saying: 'It's OK. I love you for who you are, not who you think you ought to be.' Freed from the illusion of lack.

And so, like Jesus, our identity is challenged, and to a significant extent formed, in times of difficulty. As Christians, we are blessed by our baptism with identity

² Jane Williams, *Lectionary Reflections*, SPCK (2011), pp 44-45.



as children of God. That identity asks of us who we really are. How do we live it out, especially in times of difficulty? Perhaps that may help us in the time of testing which all countries are now facing as a result of the Covid-19 epidemic. How will we respond? With fearfulness, or with love, generosity and compassion?

Lent is a good time, too, to reflect on what our temptations are, the things that snap at our heels. How can we address them so that they lose their power over us? How can we adjust our responses, staying closer to God and further from the knee-jerk responses that cause damage, to ourselves and to others? These are good questions to ask ourselves, as we prepare to witness again to Jesus confronting the worst of which humanity is capable and yet prevailing over it, revealing for all time and every place the unconquerable power of the love of God.

Amen.