

LIVING THE LIFE AS A DISCIPLE OF JESUS

Nic Denny-Dimitriou - 13th February 2005

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

Theme

One of the things that Lent reminds us of is that our discipleship of Jesus is sometimes fragile in the face of tempting shortcuts and a world familiar with instant gratification.

Sermon

One of the reasons that the story of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden is such a powerful and enduring story is because it holds up a mirror and enables us to recognise and know ourselves.

About the most useless thing you could ever do with the Adam and Eve story, is to spend your time thinking about what life would have been like for us if they hadn't eaten the fruit. In a story full of profound truth, Genesis sets out to describe why it is that we humans are so well acquainted with both good and evil. Why is it that creatures who have been made in the image of God have such a fatal fascination with those things that are rightfully off-limits?

In grappling with this question the storyteller supposes that there might have been a time when humans had no concept of evil; when evil was something we had never encountered and couldn't have begun to imagine. To us, that sounds impossible, as we are thoroughly acquainted with the presence of evil in all its varieties. Our awareness of evil is a part of us... evil in its whole spectrum from subtle forms to gross things like genocide.

Even if we could begin to imagine an existence without evil, the Christian life has nothing to do with hankering after some mythical memory of the good old days before we knew evil. The Christian life is not about trying to turn the clock back, but about preparing us to live now with integrity in the real world so that we might prepare ourselves for the coming of a new day when justice and peace will relegate evil to the place of mythical memory.

The season of Lent, whose beginning we marked on Wednesday, is an annual call to take seriously the difficulty of living such a life. It calls us to make sure we are not regarding the Christian life through rose coloured glasses, but instead have got our feet firmly on the ground and are facing up to the challenges of a life lived closely with God that defies many of the accepted norms and assumptions of the culture that surrounds us, a culture that constantly seeks to claim us as its own instead of as belonging to God.

The Genesis story tells us up front that the lure of living some way other than that to which God has called us has been there since time before our knowing. And the story of the temptation of Jesus that we heard from Matthew's Gospel today tells us that our Lord

and Messiah himself had to wrestle with some seriously tempting alternative courses of action. So if nothing else, let's make sure we do not fall for the idea that, as followers of Jesus, it will somehow always be easy for us to recognise and reject the wrong pathways.

These stories should serve to warn us that when evil tempts us, it is not always easy to recognise. The temptations that face other people may look easy enough to point out, but perhaps ours do to them too. I may have no trouble spotting your flaws and what I may regard as your compromises with sin; it may be much harder for me to spot my own flaws and my own compromises with sin.

The temptations that face us are hardly ever to do something that is overtly evil. The snake did not come to Eve in the garden and suggest that it might be a good idea and lots of fun to find out what defying God was like. Rather the snake suggested that eating the fruit would be a shortcut to great wisdom, and how could possessing such wisdom be wrong when it would make one more God-like?

The things that Jesus was tempted with were not all obviously wrong. The tempter didn't suggest that he kill his opponents or tell slanderous lies or rip off pensioners. Instead he was tempted to use his gifts to cut a few corners and speed up the achievement of worthy goals.

[It is interesting to note that the temptations we read of in that instance are related to power. Whereas huge emphasis is often placed on temptations related to abuses of money and sex, the issue of abuses of power are not always highlighted in the same way.]

We live in an age when we are surrounded by promises of instant results and gratification on tap; an age where those who can cut corners and step on a few toes to get things done are applauded. We are constantly offered great wisdom reduced to six easy-to-read chapters or self-improvement boiled down to a weekend course.

It is difficult to live in these times and not assume that there is an easy answer to every need or problem if only you can find out who to pay or which Internet link to click on.

So each year, the season of Lent is a sobering reminder that although giving in to such alluring alternatives comes naturally to us, the One who we have committed ourselves to following is one who said 'no', and is one who saw beyond the apparent short term gains and calls us to take the tough road of love and integrity, willing even to make sacrifices or endure hostility and abuse rather than compromise truth, justice and godliness.

In our worship during Lent, we deliberately tone down some of the more exultant aspects, to remind ourselves that even the joyous celebration of our life in God can become something that tempts us to hide from costly decisions involved in following the one who went to the cross.

[Examples: We don't say the Gloria, a Christian hymn of praise used since the third or fourth century, nor do we say the "Glory to the Father..." after the psalm; we have no

flowers or exuberant colour up front in our church – there is instead a starkness; in our church we have taken to having a little greenery instead, signifying that life goes on, sustained by God... and with a rosebud as a sign of expectation, a sign of the celebration to come...]

We put more emphasis on examining ourselves and confessing our sins, to remind ourselves that the wonderful news of God's mercy does not remove the need to continue to overcome our own weaknesses.

We ask ourselves whether we have got what it takes to continue to live the life of a disciple of Jesus and remain true to our baptism. In the Easter services at the end of next month, it will be a joy to restore all these celebrations as we renew our baptismal vows and celebrate our immersion into the death and resurrection of Jesus.

But between now and then, if we want to approach that Easter celebration with integrity, we have six weeks that challenge us to discipline our desire for shortcuts and quick fixes and commit ourselves anew to following Jesus for the long haul. Six weeks to take a good hard look at ourselves so that we might discover the good the bad and the ugly of who we are so that we can grow into the identity and the destiny for which we were created.

To close: Psalm 51

The Psalm for today, also used in our Ash Wednesday services; Here are selected verses from "The Message", translated by Eugene Peterson.

Generous in love – God, give grace!
Huge in mercy – wipe out my bad record.
Scrub away my guilt, soak out my sins in your laundry.
I know how bad I've been; my sins are staring me down.

You're the one I've violated, and you've seen it all,
Seen the full extent of my evil.
You have all the facts before you;
Whatever you decide about me is fair.
I've been out of sorts with you for a long time...
What you're after is truth from the inside out.
Enter me then; conceive a new, true life.

Soak me in your laundry and I'll come out clean...
Tune me into foot-tapping songs, set these once-broken bones to dancing.
Don't look too close for blemishes, give me a clean bill of health.
God, make a fresh start in me, shape a Genesis week from the chaos of my life.
Don't throw me out with the trash, or fail to breathe holiness in me.
Put a fresh wind in my sails!

(This reading not used for the sermon today – but it is hard to follow, hence including this paraphrase in the file).

Romans 5: 12-19

Sin infected the world through one person; and it proved to be fatal. It spread rapidly and no one was immune. In no time at all everybody was facing death because sin had shown up in the actions of every person on the planet. Indeed, the epidemic of sin had well and truly taken hold before God gave us the Law through Moses, but until then, there was no way to accurately diagnose it or keep a record of it. Records or no records, death was still the order of the day before the time of Moses, and had been ever since Adam. While most people had not developed symptoms as serious as Adam's - flat out disobedience of a clear instruction from God - even the mildest cases of sin proved to be fatal. Despite his role in all this, when we look back at Adam we can see in him some clear indicators of the nature of the one who would later come to clear up the mess.

Of course the free gift that the Messiah gives is nothing like the infection that Adam left us, but there are striking similarities in the way that their respective actions had such enormous consequences for everybody else. One person's stuff-up was responsible for the death of many; while the other person, Jesus the Messiah, through his own generous love, was responsible for the extravagant generosity of God becoming freely available to everyone.

The comparison ends there, though, because the consequences are clearly a world apart. The sentence that was brought down on that first act of corruption put us all on death row, but despite the sorry history of corruption since, the Messiah's free gift enables anybody and everybody to stand before God with a perfectly clean record. All it took for death to seize absolute power was for one person to do the wrong thing. So you can imagine what can be achieved through the actions of one person when that person is Jesus the Messiah! It is a sure thing that those who open themselves to his extravagant generosity, and accept his free gift of being put in the good books with God, will topple death and regain the power to live life to the full.

So it all boils down to this: just as a corrupt act by one person resulted in us all being condemned to death, so an act of unshakeable integrity by one person resulted in us all being able to make a fresh start with a clean slate and an open ticket on life. One person did the wrong thing by God and we were all tarred with the same brush; but now one person has done the right thing by God, and we're all going to get the credit!