

MORNING SERVICE

8 February 2009, Kilcalmonell, Killean & Kilchenzie

7th Sunday after Christmas

preacher: Rev. Martin Grashoff

Welcome & Intimations

Opening Hymn : 'The Lord's my shepherd'

Children's Talk

Children's Hymn : 'One more step' (CH 530)

Prayer & Lord's Prayer

Readings : Genesis 3:1-24¹ & Matthew 6:31-34

- ¹ Now the snake was the most cunning animal
that the LORD God had made.
The snake asked the woman,
"Did God really tell you
not to eat fruit from any tree in the garden?"
- ² "We may eat the fruit of any tree in the garden,"
the woman answered,
- ³ "except the tree in the middle of it.
God told us not to eat the fruit of that tree
or even touch it;
if we do, we will die."
- ⁴ The snake replied,
"That's not true;
you will not die.
- ⁵ God said that,
because he knows
that when you eat it
you will be like God
and know what is good and what is bad."
- ⁶ The woman saw how beautiful the tree was
and how good its fruit would be to eat,
and she thought how wonderful it would be
to become wise.
So she took some of the fruit
and ate it.

¹ *Good News Bible*, slightly adapted towards *King James Version* (v9, 12, 17, 21), and *New Jerusalem Bible / Tanakh* (v24). In v20 the Hebrew words are added.

Then she gave some to her husband, and he also ate it.

7 As soon as they had eaten it,
they were given understanding
and realized that they were naked;
so they sewed fig leaves together
and covered themselves.

8 That evening they heard the LORD God
walking in the garden,
and they hid from him among the trees.

9 But the LORD God called out to Adam,
“Where are you?”

10 He answered,
“I heard you in the garden;
I was afraid and hid from you,
because I was naked.”

11 “Who told you that you were naked?”
God asked.
“Did you eat the fruit that I told you not to eat?”

12 Adam answered,
“The woman you put here with me
gave me the fruit,
and I ate it.”

13 The LORD God asked the woman,
“Why did you do this?”
She replied,
“The snake tricked me into eating it.”

14 Then the LORD God said to the snake,
“You will be punished for this;
you alone of all the animals must bear this curse:
from now on you will crawl on your belly,
and you will have to eat dust as long as you live.

15 I will make you and the woman hate each other;
her offspring and yours will always be enemies.
Her offspring will crush your head,
and you will bite her offspring’s heel.”

16 And he said to the woman,
“I will increase your trouble in pregnancy
and your pain in giving birth.
In spite of this,
you will still have desire for your husband,
yet you will be subject to him.”

- 17 And he said to Adam,
“You listened to your wife
and ate the fruit which I told you not to eat.
Because of what you have done,
the ground will be under a curse.
You will have to work hard all your life
to make it produce enough food for you.
- 18 It will produce weeds and thorns,
and you will have to eat wild plants.
- 19 You will have to work hard
and sweat to make the soil produce anything,
until you go back to the soil from which you were formed.
You were made from soil,
and you will become soil again.”
- 20 Adam named his wife *Chawwa* – Eve,
because she was the mother of all *chayah* – all the living.
- 21 And the LORD God made clothes out of animal skins
for Adam and his wife,
and he clothed them.
Then the LORD God said,
“Now Adam has become like one of us
and has knowledge of what is good and what is bad.
He must not be allowed to take fruit from the tree that gives life,
eat it, and live for ever.”
- 23 So the LORD God sent him out of the Garden of Eden
and made him cultivate the soil
from which he had been formed.
- 24 Then at the east side of the Garden he put great winged creatures
and the fiery ever-turning sword which turned in all directions.
This was to keep anyone from coming near the tree that gives life.

(And from the Gospel according to Matthew:)

- 31 “So do not start worrying:
‘Where will my food come from?
or my drink?
or my clothes?’
- 32 (These are the things the pagans are always concerned about.)
Your Father in heaven knows
that you need all these things.
- 33 Instead,
be concerned above everything else
with the Kingdom of God

and with what he requires of you,
and he will provide you with all these other things.

³⁴ So do not worry about tomorrow;
it will have enough worries of its own.
There is no need to add to the troubles each day brings.”

Hymn : ‘Open are the gifts of God’

Sermon²

Well, we have just heard a clear message, isn't it? We are rotten to the bone, cursed forever, and that's it. As human beings we are 'conceived and born in sin, subject to eternal death'. Until the order of service was changed in the 1970s, my father had to utter this 'caring and loving' phrase at each baptism. Just to make sure we would not be too joyful about the event. I can still remember my poor dad switching to his highest gear to rush through these harsh doctrinal form as fast as he could. For us as his children it was kind of fun: to see if he could do it without making errors. Usually he could.

To be honest, I have met very few people who really believe this explanation still. Most christians seem to feel rather embarrassed by it. Often we accept it as a doctrine we just have to believe – and then immediately forget about it. But we do not *feel* like we are lost forever, do we? However... We surely do not feel perfect either, is it?

Actually, that is exactly the position of all human beings of all times: how to find your own, honest place in this confusing fight of good and evil. How to create some order in the midst of all this chaos? It is an ancient and an existential question. Many attempts have been made to solve this problem of how to deal with good and evil – and none was good enough to provide the ultimate answer.

One attempt which has had a huge impact on many generations of christians, is the doctrine of original sin that was still alive in my father's Reformed baptism form. And to be fair, it is still alive in many hymns, prayers, liturgies and teachings in the majority of churches today, not in the least because it became such a central issue in Protestant theology from the 16th century onwards. *But that does not mean we still have to believe it.* If times change, faith will change in order to stay connected to the One God who was, is and ever will be.

(Now, I'll have to explain a wee bit of church history – you may switch off the sound for two or three minutes if you don't like that, but you might as well pick something up.)

² Used as reference: Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing. A Primer in Creation Spirituality* (Santa Fe: Bear, 1983)

Original sin is a doctrine that was formulated by Saint Augustine in the beginning of the 5th century. It says, in short, that Adam's sin is inherited by all human beings, through which their free will is heavily corrupted. In other words, by ourselves we cannot do anything good. The ultimate consequence of this doctrine had an even deeper impact. Although Augustine was hesitant to arrive at this conclusion, he eventually did phrase the doctrine of predestination, which says that already before creation God has decided for every creature ever to live whether it would be doomed or saved. In fact the saint was more or less pushed into this through debates with Pelagius, a Celtic monk from Britain, who strongly emphasised the importance of the free will for all humans. In the end Pelagius was declared an heretic and Augustine's doctrine became part of christian orthodoxy.

However, it has never been a monolithic block sitting there immovably. To start with: the Eastern churches, in Palestine, Turkey, Greece or Russia, have never adopted this doctrine.³ The Catholic church of the Middle Ages has officially managed to combine Augustine's doctrines of original sin and predestination with the concept of a free will, which took away much of their harshness. That was not to the liking of Martin Luther, and especially not to John Calvin, or his student John Knox, who pushed original sin and predestination strongly back into the centre of theology. That is basically where our Presbyterian tradition earned its gloomy image. But again, if the times change we may need to move on from this doctrinal point.

Looking back Augustine was forced to speak harsher than he wished, while Pelagius was unfairly accused of thinking too positive about humans. In fact both were reflecting different positions within the same discussion. Both Augustine and Pelagius honestly tried to find an answer to existential questions about good and evil. In their days the Vandals and Goths flooded the Roman Empire, sacking Rome and destroying Spain and North Africa. The Empire was collapsing and evil was obvious in every street. They really struggled with that. Where was God? Likewise Luther and Calvin were strongly influenced by the many cruel wars, part of them religious wars, that devastated big parts of Europe in their days. Again, where was God?

So at the end of this brief exploration of Western church history and doctrine, we are back at the same point where Augustine, Pelagius and the Reformers started: the fundamental question of good and evil. What could we learn from the story in Genesis 3?

³ When Pelagius was tried at the Council of Jerusalem in 415, the bishops did not make a decision, but passed the case on to the Latin church.

Remember, it is a myth, not a history lesson about Mr Adam and Mrs Eve, nor a story titled 'The Tragic Fate of Adam and Eve', written by Horatius C. Parson. In the language of poetry and metaphor, even with a touch of mythology in it, Genesis 3 wants to teach us something about *who and how we are*. It is not about long ago, but about ourselves, here and now, and about the fundamental question of good and evil as we face it.

The way I read it, this story makes it crystal clear that each and every human being is caught somewhere between good and evil. We all have both in us: the power to do good or to behave evil. I don't believe this is a story about evil entering creation and destroying the good which was praised so abundantly in Genesis 1 and 2. The good is still there, just as beautiful, just as powerful as the sparkles of God's light hidden in all and everything.

The message of Genesis 3 is quite simply that we should make a maximum effort to reach for the good we can do and be. Adam has to work the soil, *in the sweat of [his] face*, and Eve has to go through *painful* labour, but that will be their way to make a living in the most literal sense: have food, clothing and children. Hard work and tough labour come with a well-earned reward, but enjoying these fruits will always be a mixed blessing. Genesis 3 is not at all a gloomy story, it's just about being realistic and honest to God and humans.

Work and labour even have their own benefits. To work hard on a difficult job and complete it successfully, is very satisfying. 'No-one ever died from hard work,' my grandfather used to say. (Well, that's after he retired.) And I remember a woman on the maternity ward who was a passionate mountaineer. 'I climbed my latest Alp when I was five months pregnant,' she told me in between the contractions, 'and I never felt as strong and safe as then.' (Some hours later she held a very healthy son.)

The story in Genesis 3 is beautifully realistic! It sharply reveals the human default reaction whenever things go wrong: we blame someone else. Adam blames Eve, and Eve blames the snake. What follows is realistic too. Only the snake gets a punishment. After all, what *is* evil, should be *treated* as evil. For Adam and Eve there is not a punishment from God, but now they have seized the opportunity to use their own free will, God realistically confronts them with the consequences: hard work and painful labour – and leaving the Garden of Eden to enter the world of daily reality.

Now Adam has become like one of us, says God. There is a point in reading this as divine irony, a wee joke by the LORD. Of course humans cannot be equal to God their Creator, but they like to *think* they can. So these are the two fundamental sins of all humans: putting the blame on someone else – finding

another to be the scapegoat – and thinking of themselves as being gods. Working on the soil and giving birth to children are two perfect ways of grounding humans, and rooting their spirituality in the very earth. Becoming God's co-creators normally happens the hard way.

What can we learn from the story in Genesis 3?

Genesis 3 is actually a compassionate story, I think. It recognises our biased default position, caught as we are between good and evil. But it warns us not to flee into either neglecting or overemphasising evil. To think of people as basically good, is dangerously naive. You cannot simply trust anyone and the most evil work in concentration camps was done by obedient familymen. There are valid reasons to be suspicious. But as our Campbelltown Community Police Officer said at the Guild last Wednesday, 'The work of the police can become a burden if you start thinking that everybody will be lying to you.' To treat all people as basically evil, is even more dangerous. If people are treated as such, the chances are high that they will actually behave as bad as expected.

We will have to accept that we are both good and evil. And we will have to make the best possible effort to bring out the good and manage the evil. After all, Pelagius was an ascetic who lived a very ethical life. Whether or not we have a free will could be a good discussion for philosophers and theologians, preferably late at night in the pub. (I've had my most Barthian discussion myself at the bar in our seminary, blessed with a helpful amount of beer.)

At the end of the day we will have no answer to the question why evil is there or how it would fit in with God's fundamentally good creation. It just comes down to what we do and don't do in daily life. We are no gods, no perfect beings, and we don't have to be. We don't have to be fatalistic either. We can read Jesus's words about not being worried as a kind of comment on the stories in Genesis. God will provide, Jesus says, one way or another – only not as we often want it, but rather as God knows we need it.

From Genesis 3 we can learn how important it is to keep a firm eye on the goodness in creation, while at the same time being very realistic about it. It *is* there, but it comes down to us to work on it and make it visible. That is our vocation as co-creators. Doing so we will reflect God's presence among us – and exactly that will make us more human. We do that according to our own particular gifts: in a good meal, in the smile of a baby, in buying fairly traded goods, in campaigning against trafficking, in governing our companies and countries in a just way. Can we do that? Yes we can!

Amen.

Hymn : 'For the fruits of all creation'

Offering brought forward

Prayer of Intercession

Closing Hymn : 'Praise to the Lord, the Almighty'

Blessing