

Year A

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

C.S. Lewis wrote the following after his conversion to Christianity. “For a long time I used to think this a silly, straw-splitting distinction: how could you hate what a man did and not hate the man? But years later it occurred to me that there was one man to whom I had been doing this all my life--namely myself. . . In fact, the very reason why I hated the things was that I loved the man. Just because I loved myself, I was sorry to find that I was the sort of man who did

those things. Consequently Christianity does not want us to reduce by one atom the hatred we feel for cruelty and treachery. . . . But it does want us to hate them in the same way in which we hate things in ourselves: being sorry that the man should have done such things, and hoping, if it is in anyway possible, that somehow, sometime, somewhere, he can be cured and made human again.”¹

Can we be cured and made human again? It is interesting, and maybe somewhat surprising, that the majestic reading from

¹ Lewis C.S. 2001 *Mere Christianity* Harper Collins p.117

the book of Genesis which we will be focussing on today makes no mention of the word 'sin', or of any corresponding word that carries that kind of meaning. The text is read as the 'Fall of humankind' and therefore we would expect an explicit naming of the terminal condition: but we don't find it. Instead we read an affirming account of God's intention for humanity which should inspire and motivate us.

Note that God placed the man in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. Here we find the clearest indication of our purpose as human beings made in the image of God. We

are to look after the good creation as those beings in the creation that God has given special responsibility. There is no mention here of humanity as the apex of creation. We are not God's gift to creation instead the creation is gifted to us in order that we would find fulfilment in our responsibilities to it. God demonstrated his trust in humanity and he reasonably expected human beings to obey him. And from that obedience would come intimacy and fulfilment: intimacy and fulfilment with God and with other human beings. Humanity has been given a vast array of possibilities

and choices to make for good; within limits. Everything is not permissible because some things will get in the way of the task that God has set for us: to till the land and keep it; to look after his creation. Hence the prohibition concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

So how do Adam and Eve, representative of all human beings; how do they respond? Do they enthusiastically get on with this rewarding task finding all sorts of new and enjoyable experiences in God's good garden? No, not at all; instead they look to the one thing that is forbidden.

British conductor Sir Thomas Beecham wasn't a great admirer of the music of his fellow Briton, composer Ralph Vaughan Williams. During the rehearsal of a Vaughan Williams symphony, Beecham seemed to be doing little more than listlessly beating time. In fact, he was still beating time after the orchestra had stopped. "Why aren't you playing?" Beecham mildly asked the first violinist. "It's finished, Sir Thomas," came the reply. Beecham looked down at his score. "So it is!" Who knows where Beecham's mind wandered to during that performance. Our minds wander very easily away from what we

should be doing and onto other things. We are very easily distracted. We forget the reason for our work and allow desire for other things to take us away. Note that when Eve was questioned by the serpent she embellished God's prohibition when replying. Not only were they not to eat of the fruit but they were not to touch it. But God said no such thing. When our minds wander off and we think of lovely scenarios we get carried away and make things up. "How unreasonable it was of God to not only prohibit the eating of the fruit but also not to allow any experience of it. There is no logic

in that and so did God really have our good in mind when he issued the prohibition? Surely no harm can come from experimenting.” And we’ve been experimenting ever since. That’s what distraction does to us. The ancient tale exposes us and continues to offer a commentary on our waywardness. God involves us in his mission to the world and we are forever entertaining distractions. The curse of the serpent remains with us; the lie that it doesn’t really matter if we indulge ourselves just for a wee while. Sure, no-one is going to get hurt. How often do you hear

that as the touchstone of ethics? What's the big deal anyway? It's only a wee piece of fruit! A wee piece of fruit with enormous implications. God's desire was for his trust to bring obedience and from obedience would come intimacy. Humanity's distraction allowed temptation to take root and from temptation came disobedience which led to estrangement. The relationship with God was affected, as was the relationship between the man and the woman. We have lived with the consequences ever since. God's mission has been compromised. We are continually prone to distraction and we

need help. So can we be cured and made human again?

The Genesis story resonates through Scripture. It dominates all that comes after it, and the great gulf that it brought has to be breached. The New Testament directly references the story in numerous places and if we step back we hopefully can see the solution. Adam's disobedience can only be put right through perfect obedience which we have seen in Christ. The tree of the fall can only be restored by the tree of the cross. The deviousness of the serpent can only be challenged by the harmlessness of the dove.

The New Testament is a commentary on all of these metaphors.

One New Year's Eve at London's Garrick Club, British dramatist Frederick Lonsdale was asked by Seymour Hicks to reconcile with a fellow member. The two had quarrelled in the past and never restored their friendship. "You must," Hicks said to Lonsdale. "It is very unkind to be unfriendly at such a time. Go over now and wish him a happy New Year."

So Lonsdale crossed the room and spoke to his enemy. "I wish you a happy New Year," he said, "but only one."

Such a sham reconciliation is humanity denying. It only reinforces the estrangement that is the fruit of disobedience. The reconciliation offered to humanity in Jesus Christ is built on the solid rock of God himself. It cannot fail. It is not temporary or limited. It addressed the deep issue of estrangement by bringing the two parties together through the only intermediary who could represent both.

This wonderfully evocative story today is the beginning point for all that follows. As we ponder it, it calls us to look at our own lives and ask questions of ourselves. Are we

obediently living in the trust that God has shown to us? As such are we enjoying good relationships with one another? If we are not then we need to ask questions of ourselves with the hope that we would be able to re-discover the answer in the obedience of Christ at the foot of the Cross through the inspiration of the Spirit. Amen.