



February 17th 2019

Genesis 3: 1-13 & Luke 8: 4-15

Septuagesima 2019

The clock is ticking. The time is counting down. Only 70 days to go before the great day of our Deliverance. I mean of course that today is Septuagesima, the Sunday which falls within the period of seventy days before Easter. We have left behind the season of Epiphany and Lent is now just three weeks away. On these three Sundays before Ash Wednesday the Lectionary takes us "back to basics", not as John Major used to urge (because after Edwina Curry that didn't go so well) but to the Book of Genesis, where God says to humanity: Deal or No Deal?

The story of Creation which we find there, together with the Garden of Eden, and Adam and Eve, is of course a myth – but a myth in the best sense of the word. It is not a scientific record of how things were but an explanation of how things are. It's highly unlikely that those who told and finally wrote down these stories ever thought they were history, and the Church did itself a great dis-service in the 19th Century by claiming that they were and therefore disputing Evolution. Myths seek to elucidate and interpret history, and they often depend on who is telling the story. And today maybe one of the reasons for the mess we're in over BREXIT is the inability, or perhaps the disinclination, to separate myth (both good and bad) from fact.

What then are these first chapters of Genesis wanting to say to us? The first thing is that God is good, and so is the world he has brought into being. "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth... God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." Some people call this "the original blessing", in contrast to "original sin". Whatever may be wrong with the world and with humanity, the first word and the last word is the goodness of God.

Some creation myths paint a picture of God or the gods as self-important and fickle, caring little for men and women or simply demanding their subservience. Not so here. God creates Adam and then, "because it is not good that a man should be alone", he creates Eve. He places them in a Garden full of good things, and he provides everything they need. He tells them to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it. And he invites Adam to "name" every other living creature. To name something is to have power over it. As the Psalmist says, "What is man that thou are mindful of him? Thou makest him to have dominion of the works of thy hands, and thou hast put all things in subjection under his feet".

We are almost like God himself. Almost but not quite, and, says Genesis, our failure to mark that difference is why things have gone so terribly wrong. Adam and Eve may enjoy all the good things of the Garden except for one, and that's the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If they taste of that, they will surely die. We have been given power but not total authority. We are not claim to moral autonomy. We should not try at playing God.

And when we kick out regardless there are consequences. That's what Genesis is saying: what we see all around us, what we know about human nature, and see only too clearly within ourselves, has gone wrong because we have lost that dependence on God, because we decided to make up our own minds on what is good.

And so we heard again the familiar story. God calls out to Adam, "Where are you?" Not just, why are you hiding from me, but really: "Where are you now? Where is it that you now find yourself?" The relationship has been lost and Adam doesn't know where he is.

The blame game starts. (I've done this joke before, but here goes..) To Adam: what have you done? Adam: it wasn't me, it was the woman. To Eve: what have you done? It wasn't me, it was the snake in the grass. To the snake: what have you done? And the snake says "I haven't got a leg to stand on".

And so they are escorted out of the Garden, into the world we which know only too well. This is not punishment by a capricious God but the inevitable consequences of what they have done. In the same way, later in Genesis, God will demolish the Tower of Babel, built by people who also wanted to play God, in order to protect them from themselves. Understand, and be thankful, for who you are but don't claim to be what you are not. Otherwise things will go wrong. Don't operate the chain saw until you've read the handbook.

This is pretty counter-cultural in a world where the emphasis is much more on individual freedom to do whatever we want, avoiding those excesses which the Law might punish, but otherwise doing pretty much whatever will benefit us personally.

We have touched before on how the Creation stories relate to the physical environment, and why our planet is now in such ecological danger. It's because we have seen the world as possession rather than gift, we have deliberately misunderstood what it is to take possession of the earth, we have been such bad stewards of what we have been given. And the more we put private profit before the common good the less chance there will be of future generations surviving to enjoy it.

But here, according to Genesis, is something even more basic, that we as individuals are both blessed and fallen. There is still much good, or at least potential for good, within us. Our Creator God wants us to be and do so much. But there's also much that has gone awry, and some of it goes very deep - that's what we mean by "original sin". Like Adam and Eve we want it all, and we don't want anyone else setting the limits. Modern man (and modern woman) wants to believe that we have "come of age" and can do whatever we want. We need no longer be dependant, especially dependent on God.

At the end of the story Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden. I like the suggestion that as they were leaving Adam turned to her and said "We are living in a time of great

social change". They must now make their own way. As indeed must we. So is that the most we can hope for, simply doing the best that we can, not expecting too much because, as the philosopher Immanuel Kant once observed, "out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made" ?

Not if we read aright the other Lesson set for this morning, the Parable of the Sower. It's easy to read it as a record of how many things can go wrong: some fell on the path and got trampled on, some fell among thorns and got choked, some fell on rock and dried up. But the more instructive point is about the Sower himself. He does not scatter the seed only where it will certainly grow. He is generous to the point of carelessness, throwing it here, there and everywhere. So there is failure, there is loss, there is waste... but there is also success, and in those places where it does grow there is life, and fruition "a hundredfold".

God has not deserted us. From Genesis onwards we can trace the continued presence of God with his People. In Jesus, who is the Sower, we see the unconditional generosity of God, making possible again what was lost in the Garden of Eden. We are fallen, but not forgotten. We are blighted, but still blessed. And while Adam and Eve may have come to a "No Deal" with God, and therefore crashed out altogether (you get the reference!), through Jesus Christ the way forward is still open to us today.

So may those of us who know that the Lord is gracious, may we "tell the tale of sins forgiven, strength renewed and hope restored". (The final hymn)