

Lent 1 and Stewardship

St. Brandon's

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; Matt. 4:1-11

1st March 2020

Today is, of course, the first Sunday of Lent. But it also marks the first of three Sundays when we'll be focusing on Stewardship – that is, on our financial giving to maintain and develop the ministry and mission of St Brandon's. So over these three Sundays the sermons will focus not so much on the practicalities – the numbers, if you like (though watch out for the numbers today) – as on the principles. Now I'm reminded of the remark by Mark Twain that when the preacher says, "It's not about the money, it's about the principles" – it's about the money. So, if he's right, those of us who are preaching have a tough task to try to persuade you that it really is about the principles – though recognising that if we get those right, then the money should follow – the numbers will add up.

Today's principle is generosity, next week's is regularity, and the third week's is cheerfulness. Today we're using the set readings because they seemed to fit the theme pretty well, but in the next two weeks we'll be changing some of the readings to fit the themes better.

Having said all that, it is the first Sunday in Lent, so what I want to try and do is both say something that's appropriate for Lent, to get us going on that journey over the next few weeks, and say something about giving and generosity.

But before I really get going, I'd like to share one worry I have this morning with you. I happen to know that, on Wednesday last week, Anna attended the Ash Wednesday service at St John's College where she's Chaplain (as you know). The preacher was one Rev. Dr Nicholas Moore – our son. So the first two sermons Anna will hear this Lent will be by Moores, son and father. And there will inevitably be some comparisons! And that's what worries me – partly because he knows what he's talking about! Fortunately, I can't see Anna from here, but you can, so if she's shaking her head, you'll know that things aren't going well – by comparison at least!

It all starts in Genesis, of course – where else? Adam is put in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the one thing he's told he must not do is to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, or he will die. Now we know that Adam took that to heart partly because at that point he's on his own – woman, Eve, has not yet been created according to this version of creation. So the bit that's omitted from our reading – the end of Genesis 2 – is the creation of Eve from Adam's rib. But when we pick the story up again at the beginning of Chapter 3, it's clear that Adam has told Eve of the one thing they must not do – because she replies to the serpent with similar words – "We can eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but not of the one in the middle", presumably the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, although it doesn't say that explicitly.

But, as we know, Eve and then Adam are deceived by the words of the serpent – the wily reptile which is a symbolic representation for the tempter or the devil or Satan (our gospel reading uses those three different terms). They hear Satan's words, they disobey God and they eat. And while they don't die immediately in the physical sense, it causes a fundamental rift in their relationship with both God and His creation. Pain (in childbirth but presumably more generally) enters in, the relationship between men and women becomes hierarchical in marriage at least, the ground is cursed so that it will be hard work getting it to produce, and Adam is told that he is dust, and to dust he will return (words we used on Ash Wednesday). In other words death does enter the world and, to reinforce that, God drives Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden and places cherubim and a flaming sword to guard the way to the tree of life – the second tree that's named specifically in Genesis (3: 15-24). This is Paradise lost, isn't it? And, for all the almost mythical way in which

it's described in Genesis, it states pretty accurately the way we experience the world – pain, relationships that get out of kilter, toil, death – and speaks to us perhaps of our own failings within that.

How, then, might Paradise be regained? Well, in our gospel reading we find another man being tempted by the tempter or the devil or Satan. Three temptations: one to do with physical desire; one to do with a desire to become someone extraordinary, a miracle worker, a celeb.; and one to do with spiritual desire – who to worship and at what cost to one's soul? And Jesus, unlike Adam and Eve, does not give way, is not disobedient, does not eat (stones turned into bread), but is obedient to the word of God – which He quotes back to the devil.

It's also worth noting that the words that Jesus quotes back to the devil are all taken from Deuteronomy when the people of Israel were in the desert, in the wilderness as Jesus was. They were there for 40 years; Jesus was there for 40 days and nights – we're supposed to get the comparison that is being made. The people of Israel, just like Adam and Eve, didn't obey God, didn't manage to get themselves out of the mess that had arisen from the time of Genesis on. They couldn't regain paradise on their own.

Which is why St Paul, in our reading from Romans, jumps from Adam to Christ – nothing else in between, the law included, has resolved the issue of paradise lost. Paul is not necessarily here working through a doctrine of original sin, but is saying that all people, without exception, have been caught up in this spiral of sin and death. But then, of course, he is saying that just as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive. We might have the knowledge of good and evil, and that maybe cannot and will not be taken away from us, but the way back to the tree of life is being opened up for us. Paradise, through Christ, is regained.

Now, if you've been keeping track of the numbers, we've had 2 trees, 40 days and nights (or 40 years), and 3 temptations. What's all this got to do with giving and generosity, you'll have been wondering. OK, so how many 'free gifts' are there in our Romans reading, how many times does the phrase 'free gift' occur? The answer is five, which isn't significant in itself, except that Paul obviously wants to emphasise it. The "free gift is not like the [original] trespass". "... much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many". "And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin". "... the free gift following many trespasses brings justification". "Much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ."

You get the point. Through God's generosity in Christ, through the abundance of grace, through the free gift that has been made available to all, paradise is regained. Only through God's generosity in Christ, only through the free gift that has been made available to all, is paradise regained.

What does that say to us at the beginning of Lent? Well perhaps not just to focus only on our own failure, our own sin, our own inability to sort ourselves out let alone the world – important though all of that is during Lent – but also to work out afresh how we might respond to the free gift of God in Christ. What might a generous response on or part be to the generosity of God which we have received in the free gift of Jesus Christ, the abundance of grace, through which paradise has been regained?

And perhaps, if we do that, there will be a multiplier effect here, so that things don't just get added up but get multiplied together. Generosity begets generosity. And it just so happens that if you multiple 2 trees, by 40 days, by 3 temptations and 5 free gifts, you get 1,200, which is pretty close, in pounds, to our monthly deficit! Additional giving at that level, multiplied by 12 months in the year, and we'd be swimming.

But it's not about the money – it's about the principle.

Amen