

First Sunday in Lent 9 Mar 2014

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

Psalm 32

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

These sermon notes were prepared before the sermon was delivered and so do not transcribe the actual sermon word for word

In today's readings we have two stories to look at, one in the Old Testament and the other in the gospel reading; one is set in the garden and the other in the wilderness.

Both can be read as narratives of temptation, or perhaps more positively as stories of decisive choices. And both contain a dialogue, a conversation, that gives voice to an encounter with God's Word.

The third reading from Romans gives us an insight into Paul's understanding of these narratives, and so serves as an invitation to us to find our own understanding of these stories.

The fact that these three readings have been chosen in the lectionary for the first Sunday in Lent, the first stage in our liturgical journey toward Easter is very helpful; for they serve to give us a starting point, and also some direction as we live out for ourselves the period of Lent that will culminate in our celebration of Easter.

We began Lent on Ash Wednesday with the solemn rite of the 'imposition of ashes'; and for some that was, and is, a shattering experience as we are reminded that "we are but dust and to dust we shall return". As the palm crosses, that were signs of celebration, were reduced to ashes, so too our 'being alive' was shattered by the reminder of death.

The amazing paradox of Ash Wednesday is that the 'imposition of ashes', the shattering of our 'being alive' is actually a life giving ritual. As we receive the mark of the ashes on our foreheads we engage in the very same movement that 'marked us with the sign of the cross' at our baptism. Both, invite us and open us into 'A New Creation'.

And now when we look at the two stories in today's readings, for the start of Lent, we see that both are narratives of creation; and in both, the subjects of the story make decisions that are creative of their life orientation.

Seeing ourselves as the subjects in these stories gives us an opportunity to see ourselves beyond the familiar selves that we 'know' in our everyday.



The Genesis story takes place on the stage of eternity; Eden is not a geographical location in the world, rather this is the garden where God walks; here we see humanity on the stage of eternity; here we're invited to see **our** reality on life's truest stage.

And so the first insight to overcome the shattering truth of Ash Wednesday: "*The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden*"; the belonging of humanity is in the place of God's abundance.

And just like Adam and Eve, we don't realise or 'know' this truth about ourselves; our true belonging; our place of creation is with God in the garden of eternal abundance.

Most of the time we only experience that part of ourselves that is defined by our sensate response to life's experience.

The Divine advice given by God in the garden to 'the man', is often seen as a restrictive command; "*You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.*"

It can also be read as a wonderful affirmation; for being alive in eternity is here assumed and accepted by God as our 'natural' order of being. However, if we turn from this toward the sensate consumption of "*the tree of the knowledge of good and evil*", then we will become aware of another order of being that is bounded by mortality; we will know death and so know the shattering experience of Ash Wednesday.

The writer of Genesis has used a clever literary device here by turning our actual experience of life upside down.

We all know our mortality from the moment of our birth, and only through a life of prayer, contemplation and a desire for life lived in the presence of God do we find ourselves alive in eternity.

The writer of Genesis has reversed this experiential order of life and that gives us an opportunity to appreciate BOTH as realities of our living and our being. And when we appreciate both of these realities as life perspectives then we can choose to give shape to who we really are.

The secondary dialogue with the serpent deepens this understanding. Eve, in responding to the serpent adds emphasis to God's initial advice, she adds; "*nor shall you touch it*".

Here is an underlining of our important insight; the world we see, and TOUCH, and eat (consume) is only one reality, and it is a reality that is bounded by death.

Our truest selves belong in the realms of the Divine, we are created 'in God's image' and we are integral to and belonging in the eternal abundance of the Divine life.

If we can glimpse this reality we can open ourselves to a much richer worldview, we are not constrained by the fear of death, but rather remain open to the newness of life and the potential of life's eternal abundance.

In the gospel, Matthew retells this Genesis story, this story of creation in light of the life and revelation of Jesus.

The literary device of "*forty days and forty nights*" alerts us to another story of re-creation, it is a similar signal that we find in the flood narrative and the exploration of Noah's movement into "A New Creation".

Matthew has no need to reverse the order of experience as the writer of Genesis did, for unlike Adam & Eve, Jesus was aware of his Divine life, he was not, like we are, bounded by the fears of mortality and subject to the sensations of this world.

Each time he is offered the worldly perspectives through the voice of the Devil, he responds with reference to the Divine Word.

Our journey through Lent is both a walk in the garden and a walk in the wilderness; and Lent's invitation to 'repent', invites us to be of a new mind, to embrace a new insight and understanding of ourselves and so to participate in a new creation, the very promise of Easter.

Will we allow death to exercise dominion of our lives and so deny the very truth of who we are; or will we accept the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness?

When 'gift', 'abundance' and 'righteousness' are allowed to exercise dominion in our lives, then we can become co-creators with God, and we become members of one body, the body of Christ.

At the start of Lent we are reminded that the marking of Ash Wednesday is shattered by the anointing of our baptism.

Note: The image above is of the Altar on Ash Wednesday – As the ‘ash’ was being blessed, the bowl exploded shattering ashes across the altar.