

# First Sunday in Lent 5<sup>th</sup> March 2017

[Genesis 2: 15-17, 3: 1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5: 12-19; Matthew 4:1-11](#) Vanderbilt  
Lectionary  
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The journey into the wilderness of Lent takes us into that place of questioning that is illustrated in today's gospel and is an opportunity for us to attend to what we believe.

In today's Western world most will never experience the "journey of Lent" and yet for much, in fact most, of humanity's history it was an integral part of living, evolving and discovering.

The everyday world was of course much smaller in the past, and in many respects less complex; with no cars and buses people walked long distances, with no TV or social media people sat and talked, or sat and wondered; with little understanding of the world there were always opportunities to be amazed and to try and work out what life was about, that is if one was not drained by the very struggle to survive.

Today, we live in a different world and the "journey of Lent" is almost a novelty; a sort of retreat from distractions into a space of a more life focussed orientation. Perhaps this is the first step in the journey of re-awakening to questions of what we believe, what our life purpose is and a seeking of direction, a looking to where the arrow of life points.

The readings each week are selected with Easter in mind, and might therefore give us some opportunities to question and to be questioned. When we enter the wilderness we leave behind the confines of home and of Church, and we walk only with what we carry ourselves.

So let's look at the readings with a view to leaving behind their baggage and carrying forward with us an openness to exploring and to unfolding our own questions.

The excerpt from the creation story in the first reading has 'obviously' been selected for the theme of 'temptation' that pervades the orthodox understanding of Lent and that is also a key element in the gospel reading.

The first question we might consider takes us to the very beginning, as we need to clarify for ourselves what understanding we have already inherited about the whole creation narrative; and that 'understanding' varies around the globe; here are some interesting figures to illustrate the where the inherited understanding sits globally:

In Europe a 2010 YouGov poll

"on the correct explanation for the origin of humans found that 9% opted for creationism, 12% intelligent design, 65% evolutionary theory and 13% didn't know." In Australia a "2009 Nielsen poll, showed that almost a quarter of Australians believe "the biblical account of human origins."

And in the United States

"according to a 2014 Gallup poll, about 42% of Americans believe that "God created human beings pretty much in their present form at one time within the last 10,000 years or so.""

If the creation story is seen as a literal documentary account then it will stay confined by its pre-enlightenment worldview and will raise few, if any, questions.

However, when we read it afresh, carrying only what we carry by ourselves into the wilderness then questions so easily arise.

It is a narrative that has God and the serpent, and Adam and Eve taking centre stage and so initially we hear four voices; but when we listen closely do we really hear only two?

This is not really a dialogue between a man in heaven and two people in a garden and then a snake up in a tree. Rather it is an encounter between humanity and Divinity, it is exactly the encounter we seek in the wilderness of Lent.

And even though the initial writers of the story and the initial interpreters may have had a different and culturally determined purpose in their reading, it can be read again with even more amazing insights and quite a different culturally contextualised appreciation that still speaks with new insights.

The very creation of what we know as Adam is a few verses before today's reading:

"then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being." [Genesis 2:7]

The translation of **a man** is a translation of the Hebrew **ha'adam** and it is more correctly referring to 'human'; and there is also a delightful play on the essence of that formation for **ha'adam** came from the "*dust from the ground*" and 'ground' in Hebrew is **adamah**.

The word we have as "man", **ha'adam**, is actually plural and androgynous, so we are not looking at a man called Adam, rather we are looking at humanity birthed out of the elements of the universe; we are contemplating our earliest origins and our real birth as the oneness of humanity.

Early primitive understandings sought to illuminate the difference between men and women, now we can read again and see only oneness, the image of God in the completeness all of humanity; a new reading that might one day lead to equal pay for women, and perhaps change the whole dynamic of world politics, for

"as of January 2017, the global participation rate of women in national-level parliaments is *still only 23.3%*".

So perhaps we can read the Genesis account with Adam and Eve as two sides of our common humanity and therefore as two sides of ourselves; likewise we have Divinity represented by two different voices, the one voice being God who walks in the Garden in the cool of the evening [Genesis 3:8] and the other being the serpent always pictured hanging in a tree.

We might note the position of the serpent and a sameness with Christ hanging on the tree of crucifixion.

Are not both these voices different calls from the Divine, one urging a simple delight in sharing the very same landscape as the creator, and the other urging a movement into the world with the very attributes of the Divine.

Both voices utter a truth; both can be heard within our Lenten wilderness.

The original writers were obviously concerned in providing a justification for 'difference'; that is readily heard when we listen to the serpent:

"But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

So, supposedly, according to the text we are about to witness a newly enlightened Eve, together with, **her husband** (notice how that marriage was slipped into the Garden of Eden) experiencing a "knowing" "like God"; and the first thing they do is spot the difference in their genitals.

Clearly this was an explanatory story, a sort of primitive biology lesson for a male dominated society; however, read in the present we might well feel the embarrassment of such a primitive lesson and see through that into something more relevant..

We can however read another version of the same text: **ha'adam** having been differentiated into the masculine and feminine aspects of humanity sought to cover, ignore, such characteristics as marks of differentiation; thereby emphasising their equality. However in the process of covering themselves they also covered their naked Godliness, and today we have evolved to cover with a variety of fashions the very reality of who we are.

In the second reading Paul is seeking to teach about the reconciliation of humanity and he contrasts Adam and Christ, both as inaugurators of eras. In his understanding Adam's action led to the sin of many but Christ's will lead many to godliness, to "eternal life".

Once again we might allow the question to arise as to why the Church sought to emphasise the Adam-ness of humanity and not the Christ-likeness; the orthodox theology of 'fallen humanity' is again born out of the duality of difference rather than an appreciation of our movement into oneness.

The Garden of Eden was not the place of sin, rather an awakening to the word of God spoken from one hanging on a tree; in every respect it parallels the Easter garden and a movement into the fullness of ourselves in the 'image of God'.

Likewise the wilderness of Lent is not a place to wrestle with sin and a place in which to try and give up naughty things, it is a going into the garden, into the emptiness of abundance so that we might encounter the wholeness of God within ourselves.

Lent is a time to take off the fig leaves of faith and stand, once again, naked in the presence of God.

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