

## Lent 1 2017, CCSY

Gen 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Rom 5:12-19; Matt 4:1-11

### 'Sewing fig leaves together'

Ever since Augustine's fifth-century reading of today's second lesson from Paul's letter to the Romans, western Christianity has tended to view the story of Adam and Eve as a catastrophic fall from perfect innocence to chronic guilt. So deeply entrenched in our collective cultural consciousness is this idea of 'original' and 'indelible' sin – of a fall from grace leading to expulsion from Paradise – that it's difficult for us to hear this second of the two creation narratives in Genesis on its own terms.

What's really going on here in this enigmatic text? The divine character, 'the Lord God', is a something of a puzzle. As any parent knows, forbidden fruit tastes the sweetest. The one who breathed life into the nostrils of this human one must surely know that it's human nature to want what we can't have? And if so, then why plonk a tree with such irresistible fruit smack bang in the middle of the playground only to say to the children, 'Uh uh! Don't eat that one or you'll die!?'?

If this is meant to be a test, then the tempter in our gospel story has got nothing on 'the Lord God'. At best it's bad parenting skills, and at worst it's some sort of cruel joke or power play: stay naïve and live, after a fashion; or eat at own risk.

And anyway, that's baloney: even the serpent knows they won't die from eating of this tree – not in the sense that it's somehow poisonous, anyway. This creature turns out to be right, showing the creator to be somewhat less than trustworthy, perhaps.

Thank goodness for the woman! If it had been left up to Adam – [Hebrew] *ha adam*, literally, 'of the earth', the 'earthling' – had it been left to this character we'd probably still be wandering around with our heads stuck up in the clouds, or somewhere much darker(!), in supposedly blissful ignorance. But the woman reaches out for sustenance, beauty, and wisdom – a courageous and entirely natural action, for which the entire burden of human sinfulness has been laid at her door.

And, like 'the Lord God' who seems to be working on a bit of 'trial and error' in this tale, the woman is an explorer. She delights in the beauty God has created, and she seeks the gift and responsibility of discernment.

Of course, as T. S. Eliot put it,

one can go 'too far'[,] and except in the directions in which one can go too far there is no interest in going at all; and only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go.<sup>1</sup>

Again as seems to be the case with 'the Lord God' character in this story, the woman doesn't quite know what's going to happen when she plucks this apple and takes a bite, but she's willing to take a risk in order to grow into the freedom and fullness of life for which she was created. No wonder after this little episode Adam names her 'Eve' – a word that is very close to the Hebrew word for 'life' – because, as the narrator explains, 'she was the mother of all living.'

This first act of human independence forces humanity to grow up and out of the garden, to leave the nest, as it were. Maybe God didn't fail parenting 101 after all, according to this writer, who has bequeathed to us not so much a story of origins, or of 'Paradise Lost', as a story of 'what is'.

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<sup>1</sup> As cited by Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), x.

Such is the hallmark of all great mythology, and I use that word in its highest and technical sense. All good stories are true; some of them actually happened. Sacred myths, like this one, show us something fundamental about what it means to be human in a complex world under God.

Eve chooses to live with her eyes open, and thus fully responsibly within the vulnerabilities and uncertainties that come with the territory of God's good, if unfinished, creation.

From this point onwards in the narrative the man and the woman are accountable for their actions, and are in a more robust, 'adult' relationship with both their creator and the creation. The Hebrew phrase 'good and evil', here, is something like the English 'from head to foot': it's all in there somewhere between these two poles, and it's messy.

Knowing good and evil, then, is less about choosing between clear-cut ethical alternatives than it is about comprehending the whole spectrum, and accepting that everything we do has consequences.

But, as the narrative goes on to suggest, God is out here with us in the real, sweaty, dirty, complex, and imperfect world – the only world there is or has ever been. God is present as we weigh our options, make our choices, and learn to live with the outcomes. Not to fix up the mess we make. This story makes it clear that such has never been God's role in the drama of creation. Rather, God is there to take the risk with us as we test our boundaries: a form of divine solidarity in the adventure of being human that the tradition of Jesus' temptation – indeed the whole season of Lent – sets before us today.

Whatever doctrinal baggage may have accrued from St Paul's rhetoric about Adam as a type of Christ, whose obedience avails to grace more thoroughly even than Adam's disobedience invokes judgement, Paul is surely right to insist on the universal significance of our being 'in Adam' every bit as much as that of our being 'in Christ'. For however we describe what these archetypal human ones – these 'earthlings' – do in this creation story, we have all done it: we are what they are, for they are us in the imagination of the biblical writer.

We have all known the pain, or even the shame, that arises from actions that were – in a very real sense – necessary, 'essential' to be more precise, as was Eve's reaching out for sustenance, beauty, and wisdom. We have all needed to sew fig leaves together: to act appropriately on the basis of things uncovered, things we did not know before – could not have known but for continuing to take the creative risk that Eve took.

Notwithstanding her nervous hand-pass to the serpent when 'the Lord God' wants to know why he's an apple short, the mother of all living might add that taking responsibility has nothing to do with apportioning blame. It's simply about acknowledging what is: coming to realize, perhaps, that the time has come to sew fig leaves together – for our own sakes and the sake of others – and there's no shame in that.

The truth will set you free, Jesus said. What truths about ourselves, as beloved children of God, do we need to embrace this Lent, so that we are not tempted to be other than what were created to be: fully, frailty and gloriously human; bearers of that image pressed divinely into our flesh; charged with stewarding – or tending, so the final mark of love in our Lenten series – our own freedom and that of the earth – *ha adamah* – the dust from which come, and to which we shall return?

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