

## **PENWORTHAM UNITED REFORMED CHURCH**

**Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> March 2011**

**Readings:** Matthew 4:1-11, Genesis 2:15-17

### **Sermon**

What are the two words that are most commonly associated with our reading from Genesis but which don't appear in the text? One's a noun and a verb, the other is a noun: Fall & Apple

### **APPLE**

Eve eats the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and passes it to Adam who eats some too – by the way he was stood right next to her throughout the story if you read it closely. She eats the fruit, but nowhere does it say it was an apple. The idea of an apple has more to do with the limited fruit painting abilities of medieval artists, or a poem by Milton than it does with the Bible. Eve and Adam eat the fruit of the tree – and that in no way should deter us from enjoying apples, or apple related products, ourselves.

### **FALL**

Now the other word is a lot harder to disentangle from how we understand our faith. 'The Fall' is an idea that has weighed heavy on the backs of Christians for centuries. This idea takes our reading from Genesis and interprets it literally. God created a perfect garden, Adam and Eve were tempted, they fell from God's grace, and were thrown out of the garden.

This is a Christian interpretation of the passage. The word 'fall' does not appear in the text, and is not how a Jew – apart from possibly the apostle Paul – would understand it. 'The Fall' does not form part of the Jewish faith. It is also important to note, just as the Jewish tradition doesn't hold this view, neither does the Orthodox tradition within Christianity.

A Jewish interpretation, and one I would argue is open to us too, is that this story is the way our ancestors tried to make sense of how the world is. The story, which was inspired by God, valued by the community, and after time gained the significance of being scripture, looked at our imperfect world and imagined what a perfect one would be like.

A perfect world where we didn't have to work, food was plentiful, we didn't have to fear other people or creatures, and most importantly God walked beside us in the cool of the evening. These opening chapters of Genesis are incredibly powerful. They point to the truth of God, but they do it in poetic, metaphorical, and mythic ways, not as literal descriptions.

We have another example in the chapters before this passage. We read of the six days of Creation, God's Sabbath rest, and then we have a second Creation story. On the sixth day God creates human beings and then, if we take it literally, starts again breathing life into the soil and dividing it to create Adam and Eve.

Taking these stories literally, as historical events that you could video record and share, is hard to do. It becomes even harder later in the story when Cain and Seth, Adam and Eve's third son, get married and have children. Where did their wives come from?

These are stories that open us up to the truth of God. They tell us important things, they were written by a fellow human being who was inspired by God, these words were found to be important by other people, they kept them, valued them, and over time they became so valuable they became scripture.

The name given to people who take the opening chapter of Genesis literally is Creationists. Creationists in all their varieties – from those that date Creation to 4000 BC to proponents for Intelligent Design – read Genesis chapter one literally.

When do you think the idea of Creationism was first argued? It's a lot younger than you'd think – it was first stated in 1930 in Chicago.

The idea of 'the fall' is older than that, but it still doesn't go back to words we hear from Jesus' mouth. They can be traced back to Augustine, who was Bishop of Hippo, in what is now Algeria, from 396 to 430 AD. So four hundred years after Jesus lived.

'The Fall' is also intertwined with two other ideas: Original Sin and substitutionary Atonement. Within this model of Christianity sin enters the world through Adam and Eve and is inherited by every generation.

Original sin is a Christian idea that says that everyone is born sinful. This means that we are born with a built-in urge to do bad things and to disobey God. We are all separated from God, all guilty, all condemned to hell. This is our natural state from birth, which is my first problem with it. The logical result of this view is that new born babies are sinful and if they die before they are baptised they go to hell.

To me a new-born baby is as close to innocence as you can get. As I'm not alone in this view it led to the creation of the idea of Limbo as a place where new-born babies and those born before Jesus would go after death. Limbo comes from the Latin 'limbus', meaning the edge. This would be a state of existence where you would not experience pain but neither would you experience the presence of God.

So how do you cure Original Sin? Well this leads us to substitutionary forms of Atonement. In this view God sent Jesus, who was free from Original Sin, as a sacrifice to appease God. Then if we accept Jesus as our Saviour and Lord we are saved. When we speak of this at a superficial level – that God loves us so much he sent his Son to die for us – it sounds good. But when we sit with the idea for a little longer it doesn't sound quite so good.

In the Old Testament we have a parallel with Abraham going up the mountain to sacrifice his son Isaac because God told him to – but in the end God provides a ram and Isaac is spared. So why, if God could find a way to save Isaac is Jesus not saved? Surely there could have been another way?

What does it say about the nature of God if the only way for humanity to be reconciled to God is through God sacrificing God's own son? It also narrows the story of Jesus to being just about Good Friday. We don't have to engage with his teaching, explore why he was executed as a rebel against Rome, or reflect upon the resurrection, because his sole purpose was to die on the cross. This way of understanding our faith has a very dismal view of humanity. It also turns faith into a transaction, and a transaction that is controlled by popes, priests, bishops, vicars, pastors and ministers.

Throughout this sermon I have used words like ideas, story, model, interpretation, or understanding. If nothing else please take from this the awareness that there is more than one way to understand our faith. If we look to the different Christian traditions we see that, and we also see it when we look around this room.

If the understanding of Original Sin and Atonement I've argued against work for you and help you live in a positive relationship with God, your neighbour and Creation – I give thanks to God for that.

I'm offering my view because they don't work for me, and there are many folk who have turned away from the Church because of them. I would offer another interpretation which you may, or may not find helpful.

I am perfectly happy to hold my faith in God in creative tension with the discoveries of science. What humanity has discovered in the fields of biology, physics, astronomy, psychology, and all those other 'ology's are to me deeper discoveries into the wonder, variety and abundance of God's Creation.

Science has shown us that heaven isn't just the other side of the sky as the Bible tells us; astronauts and rockets have been into space and not entered heaven. Geology has shown us the age of this planet, there is a molten core where hell used to be, and dinosaurs roamed this earth even though they never made it on to Noah's Ark.

I accept the insight of evolution that life evolved on this planet. Humans weren't created ready formed as we are today – we went through many stages to be as we are. This is why I find it very hard to understand a view of the universe which implies the basic laws change over time. I can't understand a view of God that suggests God changed over time.

For me before the big bang, God was. In the moment of Creation, God was. In all of the boiling atoms, gas and what finally became planets, God was. In the moment life was born, God was. Throughout that evolution, through human history, in every part of the universe, God is. In whatever the future holds, in the 5 billion years when our sun dies, if the universe contracts or carries on expanding, God will be. God is God. God that we read of in the Old Testament is the same God we read in the New, and worship and serve today. God who walked in Eden, spoke to Moses, who Jesus prayed to, and that we struggle to comprehend today, is the same.

What has changed is how we understand God. In the Old Testament they were a warlike people – they understood God as a warrior. When time after time they were defeated, rather than accept the victory of foreign gods they clung on to God and tried to make sense of it all and came to new understandings.

In the New Testament we discover the nature of God in the person of Jesus the Christ. Since then theologians and philosophers in every age have brought more and more insights. In all of our lives, through our experiences, thoughts, conversations, reading and watching, we have discovered new insights into God.

In contrast to the Original Sin and Fall models of understanding our relationship with God I would argue for the Original Blessing of God in Creation and the Ascent of humanity through time and in individual lives.

God created the universe as it is, in the moment of Creation the physical laws were set, and that precision led to life existing on this planet. If the universe had been slightly different, we wouldn't be here. How abundant is God to create a whole universe just so life could exist here? Just so you, me, and everyone we know could be.

Within all of us there is much that separates us from the perfection of God. None of us are perfect, but there is also so much potential for perfection. We do sin, but can we better understand that as something we do rather than something we are? Our nature is not one of Original Sin but of Blessing that we squander and fail to fully value and understand. We stumble, we fail, we are selfish and irritable, but we also capable of creating such beauty, acting selflessly, and being in-tune with God. For some of us this happens in moments, for others it fills their lives and we call them saints. And for us as Christians we can point to the ultimate example in the life of Jesus.

If we open up our understanding of Jesus to the whole of his life rather than just to Good Friday; if we become followers of the way of Jesus, rather than just beneficiaries of atonement; Jesus becomes an example to aspire to rather than part of a transaction. In Jesus' teaching we have instructions for how to live. In how he behaved, treated others, and opened himself up to God, we have an example to follow. In his unwillingness to back down in the face of opposition from the rulers of his age, we have an exceptional challenge. In the resurrection we have the ultimate affirmation from God that he was acting, speaking, and living in God's name.

Sin, all that separates us from God, is a reality. We need Atonement; we need to be drawn back into relationship with God. But there are more positive ways of understanding these ideas. When we present enquirers with the model of faith based on the Fall, Original Sin and substitutionary Atonement we try to make them feel guilty and then give them a solution. We tell people who are wondering about whether God is a possibility for their lives that they are inherently evil, but we have a way to remove that. In the minds of those enquirers we create a problem and then we provide a solution to the problem we've created. This works if they accept that there is a problem. But what if they don't?

What if they feel fairly okay with themselves and we tell them, 'sorry, you're not!' If someone is confident in themselves they'll just walk away or start arguing with us, but what if someone is already feeling bad? What if they're already depressed, feeling unloved, or worthless? For them we start by pushing them even further down. It's not just them who think they're worthless, we and God do too. Fortunately we do then lift them back up again – but do the ends justify the means? Wouldn't it be healthier, better, and for that matter more true to the example of Jesus, if we offered a more positive gospel?

If we shared with people the truth that they are made in God's image, that within them is the potential for so much good, that in the life of Jesus we have an example to follow, that within our congregation we commit to care, support and challenge each other on the way, and that we live to make God's kingdom a reality in this world as well as in heaven.

This way of understanding our faith works for me. I offer it for you to ponder, to argue against or explore further; and to see how it relates to the God you have experienced in life and in the person of Jesus. I'm offering my opinion. I'm not saying I'm right and others are wrong. I'm sharing what I've discerned as the truth, and I hope to share that truth in love. And that is all we can ask of each other. We all have our own insights, but the difficulty is how we share them in love, in an open and honest way, without arguing.

Which is why I was slightly nervous when I saw the set readings for the day of our AGM; but I decided to go for it anyway.

John Robinson, was the pastor to the Pilgrim fathers who I left for America on the Mayflower and one of the founders of our congregational tradition. He sent the Mayflower off with the historic commission: "God has yet more light and truth to break forth out of God's [his] holy Word."

So as we begin our journey through Lent, be open to the reality of the breadth and variety of Christian faith that exists today and that has developed over the last two thousand years. Be open to your own and other people's questions. Be open to our faith being a conversation to be had, not stifled or run away from.

Also don't blame Adam, and especially not Eve, for all the wrongs in the world. Within all of this reflect on Jesus' words to the tempter when he was faced with very human solutions to what the nature of his ministry should be; Jesus replied God, rely on God, trust God, and serve God. That is all that any of us can do. **Amen**