

Year B Proper 10 (Pentecost 2)

Genesis 3: 8-15

2 Corinthians 4: 13 – 5:1

Mark 3: 20-35

Paradise Lost?

This morning I want to focus on our first reading, from Chapter 3 of Genesis.

You may remember that last summer when I did a short series of sermons on how we receive and read the bible, I mentioned that the first part of Genesis (chapters 1 to 11) are, for many theologians, not meant to be read as an historical account of creation, but as a poetic story. And those of you who joined our Bible Study on a Tuesday afternoon will hopefully recall that from 21st July through to the 8th of September last year, we studied those first eleven chapters of Genesis.

If we were to read the Bible literally, the events described in Genesis 3 would have taken place on the evening of 23 October 4004 BC, according to one person who is confident that the bible should be received literally, and is not open to interpretation. This calculation is based on the genealogy of Jesus given in the opening chapter of Matthew's gospel – which of itself is full of symbolism and I would suggest is not to be read literally.

You will know that I don't accept such a literal reading of the Bible – I think the writers assumed we were clever enough to understand the

literary styles used and to gain a rich understanding through our interaction with their words.

There is broad consensus amongst academics that Genesis 3 was written about 950 years before Jesus was born, and was written by a group of Jews that are called Jahwists, named because they use the term 'Jahweh' (the tetragram 'YHWH') to name God. That is where we get the name Jehovah from, by the way. The Jahwists would have received an oral tradition passed down the generations and accepted the story as a myth or a legend. But they understood myth or legend as critically important.

Myth or legend contained essential truths; it was a story that accurately describes what happens to each one of us, rather than being a story about an actual historical event one evening in the garden of Eden, the paradise.

So let us all place ourselves in the garden of Eden. It has been perfect weather for gently roaming around the garden, much like yesterday evening in fact, and in that wonderful cool of the evening, the direct heat of the sun fades away, and a gentle breeze flutters some leaves on the trees. In to this scene, God comes sauntering along. God is looking forward to catching up with the man and woman for a chat at the end of another perfect day (they don't have the names Adam and Eve yet – in fact in the NRSV we only find out the name of the man in Genesis 4 verse 5, when he 'knew his wife again').

God can't find the man and woman and calls out to the man to ask where they are. Adam speaks and says he was afraid because he was naked, and so hid. After a few simple questions from God, man blames the woman for having eaten fruit from the tree. The woman is perhaps more honest, saying the serpent tricked her, and she ate the fruit.

Now, in the original Hebrew, there is a clever play on words here. For the word for crafty, that describes the serpent and for naked are almost the same, and it is pretty clear that the writers knew what they were doing in selecting a crafty serpent as the agent of this act.

So, through this act of disobedience, the perfect relationship between man and God and between woman and God has broken down. Man and woman have caused the rift, they betrayed God's love and trust in them to follow God's rules in the garden of Eden, in this wonderful paradise, which so many writers believe we should be aiming to get back to.

So what else does this story, written for a specific purpose have to tell us?

Well, I think one of the main things it points to, is that we all grow up and at some point we lose our innocence. We may all have played naked in our gardens in hot summers as small children, but as we grow conscious of our bodies, there comes a time when we want to hide our bodies or maybe more accurately our parents decide it is time to do so.

When we lose our innocence we are also gaining far more information about our world, about the 'rules' our parents set for us, and we start to challenge and break some of them, and have to start learning the hard way that our decisions and actions have consequences, which up to now our parents may well have shielded us from.

When we lose our innocence, we are much more conscious of ourselves, of our understanding of God, which as children we seem to innately accept and understand with a spiritual depth we lose. We also start to understand the differences between the protective

nature of the garden and paradise and the wilderness that is east of Eden, according to Genesis, when man and woman are banished. We start to understand the difference about a life of blessing and a life of curse, of the burdens of living outside of paradise.

But... this story also throws up some very interesting points to consider.

Why did God have to call out to the man to ask where man was? Surely God is omniscient, knows everything, and knew what had happened in the garden?

If the garden of Eden was perfect, why was there a crafty serpent in the garden?

What would have happened if the serpent had not tricked the woman and what if the man had been more resolute and not accepted the invitation to eat the fruit by the woman? Surely they would still be tilling the ground in the garden of Eden.

And wouldn't that have felt like it was a sanitized version of playing The Sims computer game? Man and woman would have been content to be totally obedient to God, without any knowledge, so would have been unthinking, or to put it bluntly, they would have been dumb? Man and woman would only have known the garden of Eden, like living in a perfect allotment in blissful ignorance of the rest of creation, beyond the garden walls. Is that really a picture or definition of paradise? Man and woman would never have been given the gift of free-will, so could not make any independent decisions affecting their lives.

Maybe Eden wasn't the perfect paradise after all? If man and woman were to remain in the garden, with no freewill what does that say about God? I can't really understand God from such a picture. If God

made man and woman to not have free-will, God is just an agent who is playing a giant game and controls us all.

I think that Paradise, the garden of Eden, describes for us the early years of our lives. A perfect paradise would surely not have had a tree of knowledge in it, or a crafty serpent. This story in Genesis describes what happens to humankind as we each gain knowledge and lose our youthful innocence. Unfortunately, as part of this process humankind seems to develop some less than attractive traits.

We start to think that we are truly independent actors on the world stage, and we start to break relationships; we almost inevitably betray the trust and love of God in the process, we put a distance between us and God, like withdrawing from sight and hiding in the garden. Putting distance between us and God; it is important to note that God does not put distance between us. And when we put distance between ourselves and God through our actions, that is what is called sin – the broken relationship, a sense of alienation to God and also to our fellow human beings.

In just seven verses of Genesis, we have uncovered a lot. I side with the academics who see this story as telling truths about human kind and our relationships with each other and with God; a story that acknowledges that it was inevitable that man and woman ate of the tree of knowledge, as all humans do as they grow up and lose their innocence; a story that points to the interpersonal nature of faith, of knowing God and having a meaningful relationship with God, based on trust and love; a story that points to the brokenness of relationships that occurs when we betray the trust and love of others, and focus too much on ourselves.

So, maybe it is best that humankind got kicked out of the garden of Eden. Maybe Paradise Lost is where we are meant to be at one level, exercising our own freewill, having been made in the image of God, and being able to choose whether to trust, whether to love, whether to break rules? But we can choose to love, we can choose to trust in God, and reflect that in aiming for the very best in our relationships with those around us, each and every day.

And maybe this understanding of the style of writing in the first 11 chapters of Genesis will help you with your faith. It is for you to decide if the literal or mythical reading of Genesis is what you wish to follow. If someone asks you about creation and asks if you believe that the world is only 6,000 years old, you will have thought about this and will have a good attempt at explaining your own point of view.

You may even have sufficient confidence to initiate a conversation about today's reading from Genesis and ask others for their opinion about creation and whether all of the bible should be read literally.

I am comfortable with the idea that this story is myth, that it is what is called an 'archetypal story' explaining truths about humankind and our relationships with God and with each other.

Over to you. What do you think? I may not be right and I am willing to accept that, but it is the view I am content to hold... for now.