# The Fall 26 June 2016

May the words of my lips and the meditation of all our hearts be always pleasing to you, our Lord and Redeemer. Amen

# Introduction

Last month Andrew gave me the challenge of picking a contemporary hot topic and now today I have the challenge of the Fall, possibly the best known and most analysed passages in Scripture. I shudder to think what I get next … But today’s passage offers the opportunity to meditate briefly on the human condition – the theme of the Fall really is ‘life, the universe and everything,’ although without wanting to spoil the punchline, the answer I’m afraid is not 42.

You may want to have your bibles open as I will be looking at the passage in closer detail as I seek to explore this theme this morning, as we think about the Fall, about Christ crucified and about ourselves.

# Context

Let us summarise the story so far, the creation of the world, which Andrew preached on a fortnight ago. God created the world and considered it not just ‘good’ but ‘very good’. I want to stress this point, the world that God created, and that included humanity and everything within the world, was very good. And, very importantly, the humans that God created were real people, in the sense that they had absolute freedom. God could have set them in a garden in which there was no temptation, no tree of life, no tree of good and evil. But, God deliberately creates human beings with free will, with the freedom of choice. The decision to eat or not eat from different trees in the garden was entirely theirs to make.

For me, this is an absolutely critical point. Freewill, the ability to choose, the capacity for decision making was part of created humanity’s DNA. There right from the very beginning. A second related point is that, as becomes clear later in the passage, the tree of good and evil (or as the serpent puts it, the tree whose fruit once eaten makes you like God) is more important than the tree of life. God makes no prohibition in relation to eating from the tree of life until AFTER Adam and Eve have already eaten from the tree of knowledge. Immortality is less prized than rationality – knowing the difference between good and evil!

But back to the passage. At this stage in the story the key is to remember that the world God created, is created perfect. The imperfections and everything that harms, endangers and tarnishes this perfection is a direct result of human action.

So to summarise: God created a perfect world, God created human beings made in his own image who have the capacity of free will, and the world he created is real in that it also contains opportunities to exercise free will – in short a world recognisable to us in that it contains temptation.

So what happens next?

I think that the chronology of events as well as what happens is very revealing. The serpent sidles up to Eve, the ‘crafty’ serpent, a symbol of how pernicious and insidious temptation, sin and the devil can be. The starting point is not a direct challenge to God’s authority, the question is not the tree of knowledge looks really tasty, why don’t you eat from it? Or, don’t you know what power its fruit had, God is just being jealous. No it is a very sophisticated and, I think, real, almost Socratic dialogue which through an oblique, subtle and devious approach achieves its objective.

The serpent asks an apparently innocuous, innocent question – did God really say you can’t eat from any tree? It is a question that immediately encourages a response, of course he didn’t say that. And Eve expands, enters into a dialogue which of course is exactly what the question was designed to elicit – a response.

So when Eve explains what God actually said, again the serpent craftily does not directly say, go on eat anyway. Instead the serpent makes a more challenging statement, ‘of course you won’t die’ – which in a sense was a logical response since they could have eaten from the tree of life, the fruit of which was not prohibited. Rather, the serpent continues, God knows that if you eat from the tree of knowledge you will be like him. Now, note, the serpent doesn’t say, go on eat.

No, temptation is again realistic. The serpent simply points out a fact. The decision about what to do, about how to respond is left clearly to human beings. And, rather than challenge the serpent – well, how do you know? What makes you so sure? Why do you think God might be like that etc …, instead we read that Eve ate and gave to Adam for him to eat as well.

Again, to be clear, although the serpent highlights the implication of eating from the tree of knowledge, ‘bigging up’ if you like the consequences, the decision to eat or not to eat is entirely one for Adam and Eve to make. The world God created was perfect, the imperfections are entirely the result of human decision making, human actions. But, before getting into that, let us consider further the other key dialogue, between Adam and Eve and God, which I think is fundamental to understanding our fallible nature and our relationship with God.

So after finding Adam in the garden and finding him clothed, he asks “have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?” Now, what do you think would be the most natural response to such a question. Maybe an acknowledgement of fact – “yes I have”. Maybe a response which demonstrates that because they have eaten from that tree, they now understand good and evil and so would recognise that, replying perhaps “yes I have. I know that I should not have done so.” Maybe even to have added “I know that I have done wrong”. Or, full of wisdom, “I am sorry for what I have done”. Or perhaps the best answer: “Yes I have. I know I have done wrong. I am sorry for what I have done. Please forgive me.”

But no, none of these replies. Instead, Adam’s immediate (HUMAN) response is to avoid a direct answer to the question and to blame someone else. He does not admit straightforwardly to eating the forbidden fruit, instead he says ‘the woman you put with me, she gave me fruit, and I ate it.’ Absolutely zero sense of personal responsibility, absolutely zero acknowledgment of accountability for his action, absolutely 100% effort to direct the blame elsewhere.

And does Eve do any better? Sadly, even though she too has eaten from the tree of knowledge, she, like Adam, shows no sign of the wisdom such fruit is supposed to convey to the consumer. Just as Adam did, she avoids God’s question and blames the serpent – the serpent deceived me and I ate. He did it sir, he did it. Once again, absolutely zero sense of personal responsibility, absolutely zero acknowledgment of accountability for her action, absolutely 100% effort to direct the blame elsewhere.

And as a consequence, and I personally picture the latter part of the story with God, deeply saddened, with heavy heart, feeling betrayed, has no choice but to punish Adam, Eve and the serpent.

The consequence of their actions is the deeply disfigured, shattered, chaotic world in which we live. This world, no longer perfect, but created as such by God, is our fault. It is the fact of sinful, fallen human nature that has caused this. One might even argue at a push that the serpent was collateral damage – all the serpent did was to pose the question. The real responsibility lies with Adam and Eve, recognisably human people, with the capacity of freewill, who deliberately gave in to temptation, who defied God’s will and through whom sin came into the world. I sometimes wonder whether the story would have been different, had Adam or Eve given a more appropriate response …

But in spite of all of this, in spite of God’s (I think regretful) banishment of Adam and Eve from Eden, in spite of our sinful nature, our predisposition to concede to temptation – as Shakespeare put it so brilliantly, ‘ man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward’. In spite of all these things, God is a merciful God, a forgiving God, a loving God.

For, as Paul so eloquently puts it, as in Adam all die, so in Christ are all made alive. We are given through God’s greatest gift – his Son dying on the cross for us -, we are given a second chance! Though Christ crucified we have the opportunity, through faith, to relive that original perfected relationship with God our Creator. What Jesus does in his obedience until death is to open up for us the possibility of living again with the Father, as truly one of his children. How amazing is that?!? As Paul puts it in Romans 6 vv17-18:

But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

Through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, through his death atoning for our sins, we can be made clean, set free from sin and live as God’s children. Through faith we can do this as we promise in the baptismal service – we turn to Christ, we turn away from sin and the devil. God keeps his promises when we keep our promise!

Unfortunately, as we all know only too well, our instinctive response, our sinful nature and our poor decision making does not always equip us well to deal with the temptations that permanently, insidiously and compelling surround us. Sadly, we do not need the story of Adam and Eve’s disobedience to alert us to the presence of sin and temptation in our world. Its imperfections, its ‘groaning in travail’ (to use a Pauline phrase), its fragility are all too obvious. What is less recognised is that the fault is, was, and continues to be ours.

The sadness of the present is that we have learned nothing from the days of the garden. Still today human responses typically refrain from direct acknowledgement of what has happened, still our first instinct is to avoid answering the question, to attempt to shift the blame to someone or somewhere else, to weasel out of an uncomfortable situation. Absolutely zero sense of personal responsibility, absolutely zero acknowledgment of accountability for our action, absolutely 100% effort to direct the blame elsewhere.

But this is not our destiny, that is not what God wants which is why he sent his Son to save us from our sins. This is the hope that he sets before us, or to use Paul’s words again from Romans 6 vv12-14, 23:

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace … now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That is God’s promise to us!

So I pray for all of us:

Heavenly Father, thank you for your creation, thank you for the perfection that still persists in our world in spite of all that we do. We humbly acknowledge our manifold failures, our sins of commission and omission, our selfishness. We are so thankful for the gift of your Son who came to set us free and lead us to your light. We commit ourselves through faith, through your merciful and loving nature, with the guidance of your Spirit to live as the children you want us to be. Today and always, Amen.