

St. Aidan's West Epping, 1st March 2020

“TEMPTATIONS AND THEIR OUTCOMES”

(Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-21; Matthew 4:1-11)

Today we have heard two famous stories in our Bible readings: they have much in common, and many contrasts as well.

They are stories about temptation: the temptation of Adam and Eve, and the temptation of Jesus. Both temptations set directions for the future. One takes place in a beautiful garden, while the other is in the wilderness. Both involve the question of whether God is to be trusted. Both involve the question of how to relate to God. Both seem to offer very attractive opportunities. Both take elements of truth, but the truth is twisted so that it is distorted into lies. Ultimately the temptation comes from Satan, the Evil One, although in the first story he speaks through a serpent. And the results of both affect all people, and determine in different ways the future of the world.

In Genesis 3, the serpent speaks to Eve, and yet Adam is clearly implicated. Both know the one small limitation set by God. One tree in a garden full of beauty and wonderful provision. Death will be the result of eating the fruit of that one tree. Adam and Eve have so much that is good. They **know** so much that is good. There is only harm to be found in the attempt to know good **and** evil.

We know the temptation to set aside the good things we have, and to focus on what we do not have. That desire for “more, more, more” when we actually have more than enough. Adam and Eve are tempted to question God’s goodness and generosity and concern for them. They are tempted to question God’s motives, and to think that they can truly become like him. But of course **he** is God and **they** are creatures. That can never change. They will always be human. They also forget that they are **beloved** humans: they are made in God’s image, but ultimately they are actually **not God**.

They are persuaded that God is not to be trusted, that **they** can decide for themselves what to eat and what to do. So they eat, and they do come to **know** something they didn’t know before. They know they are naked: of course they were naked before, but it was of no significance. Now they feel exposed, embarrassed. They feel shame and guilt. It is genuine knowledge, but they would be better off without it.

And as we read on in the scriptures, we see the ongoing results, which affected not only Adam and Eve, but all of humanity after them. **We** no longer live in that beautiful garden. We still live in a world which is good in so many ways, but it also has so many problems: war and violence, sickness and pain and disease, suffering and struggle, ignorance and confusion. And of course death.

The story of Adam and Eve is **our** story. So often we know what God would have us do. But we give in to temptation. We do what feels natural, what feels easiest, what feels most desirable, what **we** want – even if we know that it is not what God wants. I have recently heard of yet another greatly loved and admired Christian leader who has been found to be a serial abuser of women. Temptation comes to **everyone** and it is so easy for any of us at times to give in to it. But the result is harm to others as well as ourselves. The result is a fractured relationship with God. To fall for temptation does not satisfy us: we will always want more.

The sin of Adam and Eve determined the direction of the world, our world. We humans all follow in their footsteps. We can’t say “it has nothing to do with me”. We are all flawed human beings.

But there is a second story of temptation in our readings. Jesus, about to begin his ministry, spends forty days in the wilderness. The devil tempts him. “Satisfy your physical needs. Satisfy the desires of people. Turn stones into bread. If you are the Son of God, you don’t need to be hungry. If you give the people food, you will please the people, and get people to follow you.”

And then: “If you are the Son of God, leap from the top of the temple. God will take care of you: even the scriptures talk about that! And you will impress the people. They will follow you.”

And finally: “If you are the Son of God, you have the **right** to power. You know how much control I have in the world. I’m prepared to hand over control to you. Worship me, and I’ll give you the world. You’ll have real power. You can be sure that the people will follow you.”

The temptations were real and attractive and powerful. Satan picked up grains of truth and twisted them. But Jesus knew his Father, and he knew his scriptures. And he knew his purpose. So he rejected the call of Satan. He would not become a mere showman. He would not turn away from the path of humble and obedient service to which he had been called.

And the result of Jesus' resistance of temptation was suffering and death for Jesus - and salvation for us!

Two stories of temptation: one temptation was effective and had disastrous results, while the other temptation was effectively resisted, and this led to a ministry that changed the world. And that links up with our reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans.

It was Peter who commented that in the letters of Paul there are "some things hard to understand", and you might have felt that those words of Paul we heard from Romans 5 were like that! His argument in these verses seems pretty complex, and yet what he is saying is pretty important, and rather wonderful.

What Paul is doing is like having a blackboard or whiteboard with a column down the middle. He is contrasting Adam and Jesus, and their effects in the story of God and God's world and God's people.

Let's see what he says about **Adam**. He tells us that sin came into the world through Adam's sin. But sin cuts us off from God, the giver of all life, and so death became part of human existence, right from the time of Adam. It wasn't until the time of Moses that the law of God was formally handed down, but people had always had some knowledge of how they should live, and they had always sinned. The law simply spelt things out clearly, so that there was no question about how God wants people to live, and no question that we are indeed sinners. So death continued on up to Moses' time and from there throughout history. Of course **we** still follow in Adam's steps: we too are sinners, worthy of God's condemnation, and the ultimate result of sin is death.

That's one side of Paul's whiteboard. That's the bad news side.

But then there is the good news side. **Sin** links us with Adam, but through **faith** we are linked with **Jesus**, the one who rejected temptation and remained free from sin: the one who truly fulfilled God's plan and purpose for him. Sin opened up condemnation for sinners, but Jesus opened the way to grace. Adam's first sin opened the floodgates of sin and death and condemnation, but Jesus opened the way to grace and forgiveness and justification. Many of you will have heard of the simple definition of justification as "just as if I'd never sinned". We are treated as people who are free from sin because Jesus took **our** sin and guilt on himself. We are treated as righteous people, because we have become Jesus' people.

Adam through his sin opened the way of death. Jesus through his death on the cross opened up the way to forgiveness and justification and eternal life. Jesus reverses those terrible results of human sin that began with Adam.

Yes, we are still sinners: perfection in this world is not ours yet, and temptation is still a reality. Jesus shows us the way to resist temptation, and he holds out grace and forgiveness to us when we fall short. Let's remember that we do belong to Jesus, not to Adam. The true victory does not belong to the evil one, despite that story in Genesis. Jesus is the victorious one.

May we this Lent remember Christ's victory **and** his grace. Let us take up our cross daily and follow him as the bringer of grace and life. Amen.

Paul Weaver