

Genesis 3:1-7

Matthew 4.1-11

When our two older children - now 29 and 27 years old - were much smaller, I remember that we used to have some fairly stringent rules about certain programmes that we wouldn't allow them to watch on TV. At the time, the vogue among small boys with a developing appetite for violence, was for two particular north American imports: the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and Power Rangers. These were the programmes that every five-year-old aspiring superhero wanted to watch (eagerly accompanied by younger sister); and these, as I recall, were the very two programmes that we, in our wisdom, decided to banish from our domestic viewing schedules. As the theme music to these shows rolled on a Saturday morning, so we reached for the off-switch, or at least the channel change button. We were, as you can imagine, very popular parents.

At the time I think our decision was driven partly by the sort of naïve idealism which supposes that careful censorship of this sort, avoiding depictions of animated belligerence, will result in the development of healthy, well-balanced and wholly pacific teenagers and (eventually) responsible adults! Of course, we soon learned better, and realized that there were a hundred other influences, just as potent, that we couldn't edit out so easily. But there *was* something else going on too, I think: The attempt to instil in our children while they were still young, but

old enough to get the idea, that not everything is good for you; that there are thresholds that shouldn't be crossed; and that, even if we hadn't necessarily identified all the relevant ones or the right ones, there were times when Mum and Dad's word had to be obeyed, because in broad terms, being older and wiser, Mum and Dad do sometimes know best. Not everything is good for you. There are boundaries in life which are not good ones to cross. Even if identifying those is not always easy and we are constantly having to think afresh about the nature of the dangers involved. Not *everything* is good for you. Not *everything* should be treated as a matter for personal choice and 'learning the hard way' (as my Dad used to say when, as a child myself, I ventured on some foolhardy and potentially dangerous new behaviour - lighting fires, playing with extremely sharp knives, smoking cigarettes, or whatever it was that particular week). There are some things in life that are so toxic, so threatening to our well-being, so likely to do us damage that we need to turn our backs and walk away from them. That's the lesson. And so, even if watching 'Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles' may *in itself* have been no more or less harmful or unhealthy than any number of other things, 'if Mum and Dad say you shouldn't do it, then you shouldn't do it' was at least a principle worth embedding in childlike consciousness.. On the whole, I think, we got the point across, and the programmes went unwatched.

Our Old Testament reading this morning recounts the familiar tale of Adam and Eve in the garden, and the serpent's temptation of Eve with the piece of fruit taken from the

forbidden tree. And in this story, I think, something essentially similar to our attempted televisual ban is going on.

Not that Adam and Eve are children. We mustn't mistake innocence (and in the story they are, as yet, certainly innocent) for childishness. There's no suggestion here that Adam and Eve are little ones, easily led astray. As the poet John Milton makes clear in his poem *Paradise Lost*, the first man and woman are regal figures, created with all their faculties functioning and finely tuned. And Dante, in his *Divine Comedy*, refers to these prototypical human creatures as 'the only fruit that *came forth* ripe and perfect' (*Paradiso*, 26.83). So, when the serpent confronts them, Adam and Eve are *not* naïve. The serpent *lies* to them about the power which eating the apple will bestow- but their decision to take and to eat it is one made in the cold light of day, responsibly, and with a high hand.

So, what exactly is this apple that, bizarrely, they are proscribed from touching, let alone eating? Well, we don't know, and it doesn't really matter. Because in the story it is, I think, merely an arbitrarily chosen object of proscription - something (the *only* thing in the whole garden with all its rich provision) that God selects precisely in order to set it off limits and so present the newly created Adam and Eve with the possibility of following God's prescription, or deciding to set it aside and assume that they know better. The opportunity for obedience, and for disobedience.

So, you see, the point *isn't* that there's anything very special or very powerful about either the tree or its fruit as such, although the serpent *pretends* that there is - 'Hah', he whispers in Eve's ear, 'God doesn't want you to *touch* it because God knows that in the moment that you take a bite of this magnificent fruit, you will suddenly *become like God himself*, seeing the world with God's eyes, possessed of God's own knowledge and power'. It's a pathetic lie, of course, as the seductive possibilities of evil always are.

No, the significance of the tree and its fruit is simply that God has told them that they *must not* touch it. *That's* what matters, and in the story it's really *all* that matters. God has, here, laid down a boundary - and to cross that boundary is to trespass into disobedience. That's the point. Look, God says to them in effect, not everything is good for you. There are going to be limits. And to make that point clearly and concretely, here's something you may not do, because I *say* you may not do it.

The story is not about a magic apple, or about strange powers that eating that apple bestows. It's about something much more simple and straightforward, and something much more familiar to us all - something that lifts this story out of the realm of fascinating ancient parable into a story with real purchase in my life and yours. The importance of obedience (and the eventually fatal consequences of disobedience) to the one who has created us and given us not just the gift of life itself, but the Edenic beauty of a world in which to enjoy it in his company. Obedience

is the appropriate way for men and women to live in the world together with God. It's what grants life in all its fullness, and enables human flourishing and fulfilment. Disobedience, on the other hand, warps and twists our lives, putting us in a state of alienation and contradiction not just in our relationship with God, but with the world itself, with others, and finally with ourselves and all that we are meant to be and to become.

So, Adam and Eve's Fall is all about this - about what happens when, rather than living our lives in accordance with God's command, we think we know better and can do better for ourselves, and disobey. The apple, the serpent tells Eve, will give you special knowledge, knowledge such as God himself has. And Eve's disobedience, *believing this* to be true, is therefore precisely a bid to put herself in God's place, to *be God* for and to herself, to make her own rules and to adjudicate in her own life, deciding for herself what is good and true and beautiful, rather than learning these things from the loving call and command of the one who has created her. And that's the essence of all sin, all disobedience to God: inverting the proper order of things and seeking, in practical terms, to push God aside and be God to and for ourselves. And once we take that step, once we reach out and touch the fruit, once we start down the road of living life as a project in 'practical atheism' - that, is, factoring God into the picture, if at all, only when it suits us and doesn't conflict with our desires and appetites - we put ourselves in a place where we are no longer able to step back. We release the virus into the bloodstream. We spoil the very thing we thought we wanted to

claim for ourselves and might even be able to improve upon, and discover that we cannot fix it. The damage is done. We may wish we hadn't done it, may regret its consequences, may even suffer remorse for our stupidity. But the damage is done, and getting the snakes back in the bag is something beyond our capacity; far beyond it in fact.

So, the story of the Fall is really a pretty unpleasant story of human greed and hubris. God creates a paradisaal world, and gives it as a gift for men and women to live in and to enjoy. Come, God says, see the world that I have made. Take, and eat; taste and see that it is good. *Enjoy* it to the full; celebrate its colour, its sound, its smell, its taste - but where I draw the line, respect that, and don't go there. Live as I have made you to live, and you will flourish and thrive and enjoy life to the full; but if you trespass over the boundaries, if you disobey, if you decide that you know better ... well, you'll spoil everything. Don't go there.

Who would be so stupid as to do that? Well, it's a story not to be trifled with, because it's a story played out again and again and with exactly the same ending in each of our lives day in and day out. Because, not only can we not get the writhing snakes back in the bag despite any efforts we might actually make to do so, in reality we keep on foolishly untying the bag again and again, reaching out for the tasty apple, still convinced, it seems, that in doing so fulness of life may lie within our grasp and our control - believing the serpent's lie, and trying to put ourselves again and

again in God's place, preferring our own judgments, our own wisdom, our own sense of direction to those God would urge upon us. And so, in a very real sense, pushing God out of the picture. And things are badly and frighteningly out of control - in our individual lives, in our communities and institutions, and in the world. And the answer certainly does not lie in resort to just one more invigorating and illuminating bite of the apple.

Our Gospel reading this morning is precisely that - *gospel*, the announcement of some good news for a world in which things have gone badly and frighteningly out of control. In it we find the same old story, the story of Adam and Eve and the seductive temptation to disobey God. But this time the story has a different sort of ending - an ending so surprising that it should force us to sit up and take notice. For here, the tempter, rather than succeeding in his seductions, is punched soundly on the nose and sent packing to regather his troops. And here, right at the start of his ministry, we begin to see that this odd individual, this carpenter from up the country and with a slightly ropery family history, needs to be watched. Because he's no ordinary man. Not just one more in the series of those to be sucked into the mire of sin and evil, but someone who, unlike us, is able to do something about it; able to get the snakes back in the bag, to deliver the antidote to the virus, to sort out the mess we have made and continue to make of things. Because here, as Matthew has already signalled clearly enough, God himself comes to be with us, and to accomplish all this not by divine fiat or the snap of his

fingers, but by struggling alongside us as one of us and triumphing where we fail and fail again.

John Henry Newman captures something of this in his familiar hymn 'Praise to the holiest in the height':

O loving wisdom of our God!
When all was sin and shame,
A second Adam to the fight
And to the rescue came.

O wisest love! that flesh and blood,
Which did in Adam fail,
Should strive afresh against their foe,
Should strive and should prevail.

Well, this is only the beginning of the story of how, in the course of Jesus' life of constant self-offering to the Father even unto death, the forces of evil were definitively routed, and lost their claim and their purchase on humankind; how our humanity was healed from the disease of sin and cleansed from its stain. This is only the beginning, and there's much more struggle to endure, a struggle that continues (as we shall through the course of this Lent) to the story's climax in the drama of Holy Week, and the cataclysmic events of Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter morning. The story of how, far from coming to us simply to show us how to live better lives or proffer helpful advice on being nice to each other, in Jesus, as our liturgy reminds us, God came among us and 'broke the bonds of evil and set us free'! That's a story worth stock of, so let's stick with it as, over the next six weeks, it moves and we move with it towards Easter!

