

Lent 2 sermon by Andrew 8 March 2020

Genesis 12: 1-4a; Romans 4: 1-5, 13-17; John 3: 1-17

Last week we saw Adam and Eve banished from the Garden of Eden. Sin has entered into the world and now Eve will bring forth her children in pain and Adam will only make the earth fruitful to feed his family by back-breaking toil. So the fruit of their disobedience, their lack of trust in God, is going to be sour fruit indeed. St Paul gets it when he says: "The whole creation groans in travail awaiting the glorious liberation of the children of God."

So, this is the great legend of the Fall, a powerful, eloquent ancient myth to explain why things are the way they are. And I use the word "myth" as theologians do, meaning a story that contains a truth far greater than its details. It's the message that matters. And the message is, as we experience it, that sin is much more than people doing bad things.

When I was at another church years ago a little girl came rushing in one day, desperate to tell tales on her wee sister. "My little sister has broken a glass – will she go to hell?" Well, not quite. But that's often the childlike and even childish way we think. Sin is doing bad stuff. But Paul's idea of creation groaning is much closer to the mark. There's a flaw, it seems, in everything. There's always a snake in the garden, something that undermines even our best intentions. Paul again: Wretched man that I am, for I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.

And it's not just human beings, but creation itself groans. Stuff goes wrong. There are floods and earthquakes, uncontrollable bush fires and – yes – new diseases to contend with, and just when we think we've got so many of the old illnesses on the run with vaccination and antibiotics and all the rest. We discover that we're not in control after all and we're reminded that we're still the children of Adam and Eve, fragile and sometimes scared, in a world where we're much less in charge than we thought we were.

Greta Thunberg and David Attenborough act as modern day prophets to live more mindfully in this world while we still have the chance, so that we don't yet again suffer for the consequences of treating this world as a supermarket of good things where we can just endlessly take. So climate change and the consequences of climate change, and not unconnected with that, our increasingly interconnected world where we fly everywhere all the time and disease can leap continents so easily, all these things remind us that we're fragile creatures in a fallen world.

For us, it makes for a very strange, thought-provoking kind of Lent. But our readings today remind us that this is not a situation where God is absent. Adam and Eve aren't banished from the garden then abandoned. Today we see their descendant, Abraham, being given a new promise, a new hope. But he has to trust. By now Abraham is a wealthy man. He's got more wives, servants, camels, flocks than he can count. He's used to being in charge, in control. But now he's going to face a journey where he doesn't know the way, he doesn't know the destination. What dangers is he going to have to face? And as the story

evolves there'll be lots of them. Paul then uses Abraham as an example to encourage the Romans to be faithful, to keep going when they're living under the constant daily threat of persecution – I can't remember which historian spoke about life in those days being "nasty, brutish and short", but for the Romans, and especially Roman Christians, it often was.

Finally Nicodemus, another man used to being in charge, a significant figure in Jerusalem, comes to Jesus by night. He comes by night so he can stay in control of the outcomes, keep his options open. But he can forget that, because Jesus draws him into a vision of a future – and Nicodemus thinks he's too old to have a new future – where he has to let himself be carried by the Spirit and, like Abraham before him, trust.

And why is he to trust? Why should any of us? Because the Son of Man is come into the world. God looks on our fallen world and enters it, and we see Jesus fully present to a world where storms can sink fishing boats and people get sick, where there's injustice and cruelty and wilful ignorance and he'll take it all into himself on the Cross. God shared, God continues to share, all of it. Coronavirus and forest fires and floods and people's personal sadnesses in their millions. There's an old pop song that says "God is watching us from a distance". It's a great song, but it's wrong on that. God is not watching us from a distance. God is here. Sharing in all of it, present in all of it.

John 3:16 is probably the best known Biblical quote. You see it on everything from tattoos to T shirts. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. And not just gave, but "gives". So into the fallen world, Jesus comes, and he will be crucified by the world's fallenness, and by ours.

But the Jesus who shows us that death doesn't have the last word, isn't the last word, he asks us now to be his continuing presence *in this world*, just as it is, as we suffer alongside all our fellow human beings. He asks us, with all people of goodwill, to be a redemptive presence in the world. The editorial of the Church Times this week pointed out that love can be viral too. How about we pass that on to each other, and hope and kindness and compassion as well? Let's make those things viral among us.

We might be scared, we're realising that we feel quite small in this world sometimes, we're not in control. But we're not powerless. We're bearers of the Spirit of God who brings new life, and healing, and hope.