

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

Life is largely about choices, and all our choices have consequences, for good or for bad. And it isn't only WHAT we choose, but WHY that matters. It's here that the whole issue of temptation comes in. Temptation plays on our sense of self, of who we are. It appeals to our dignity, but also to our willingness to deny personal responsibility and blame others. How we handle life's many temptations is an indicator of our character, which is why the biblical story places temptation at the heart of the human story.

The Garden of Eden is in many ways a parable of the universal experience of conception and birth. Life begins in the womb, where all we need is provided, and we have little or no self-awareness. But after thirty-nine weeks, more or less, something happens to trigger our sense of individuality, of separateness from our mothers, and the price of that is expulsion into the world outside. We are, of course, still too fragile to make it on our own, so we need the care and nurture of our families, whose responsibility it is to help us grow in relative safety, while gradually extending the limits of our confinement.

Family and community life is meant, on the one hand, to nurture our self-confidence, and on the other to socialize us, to make us aware we are not alone in the world, that our humanity is fulfilled only in relationship to others, and to the Supreme Other we know as God. And so we live with the constant tension between "Me" and "We", between our identity and calling as

individuals, and our identity and calling as communities. As individuals we can't survive on our own; but equally there can be no real communities without the individuals who create them and are created by them.

There are problems, of course, with the story of Adam and Eve. According to Genesis they were innocent in the sense of being naive, unaware of themselves and of others. Is this really what Paradise is about, a place of blissful unawareness? If so, it's quite different from the City with the Garden in the midst of it and a river running through it, which we find at the other end of the Bible in Revelation. There the saints are engaged in active worship of God and the Lamb. They have stories to tell about alienation and reconciliation, of the interdependence of Nature and the City, of the coming together of once irreconcilable opposites. Original sin gives way to final righteousness. All of us, of course, live between the garden-womb and the heavenly city, which "in-between-ness" is what Lent is about. So let's explore a little more the passages we've just heard read to us, beginning with Adam and Eve's naive innocence.

We've probably met people who seem to live in another world, untouched by the rough-and-tumble of everyday life. They seem to drift through life without being affected by it, and there's something quite appealing and moving about their innocence; but they don't really connect with the rest of us. We, on the other hand, may have become toughened by life's hard knocks. Our worldly-wise ways may have come at the price of our dreams and our ability to trust and risk relationships. We regret our lost innocence, and our lack of vision. We look at our lives, and with singer, Peggy Lee we lament, "Is that all there is?" We may know the difference between good and evil, but have come to believe our destiny depends on us and us alone.

We cloak our lost innocence with the fig leaves of status, wealth, imaginary achievement, and blaming others for all that goes wrong. After all, it is we who know, we who are the enlightened ones. Our inflated sense of self, dispenses with the need for God, or even others. What we fail to realize is how small our circle of light is, how little we know, how great our ignorance, not only of life around us, but even of ourselves. The sin of Adam and Eve was not that they grew into consciousness, but that they thought they knew it all, and exchanged responsible freedom for blaming, and pretending they were mere victims. Theirs is not an ancient tale from far away and long ago, but a story about us. How often do we demand instant gratification, the forbidden fruit of our day, then go on quickly to blame others when called to account for our greed and short-sightedness?

But there is a SECOND Adam who gives us a second chance.

The Gospels tell us how Jesus, immediately after being declared God's Son, is driven into the wilderness and tempted. He, too, is told to use his status and power for his own immediate gratification; he, too, is invited to play God by defying the laws of nature and indulging in grandstanding; he, too, is encouraged to take the shortcut of submitting to the great tempter and allowing the ends to justify the means. There is, of course, nothing naive about Jesus. His innocence is that of one who knows the full force of his temptation, but refuses to be diverted. The big issue for us is that we are so easily distracted from our main goal in life. We may lament the greed and violence of the world around us, but we so easily use the way of the world as an excuse for embracing expedience over principle. Lent is a time for us to take time out and ponder what's really important. Does the church exist just to gratify our own desires? Do we think

because we're Christians that we're not bound by the rules? Do we believe the cause we serve justifies questionable policies and tactics? Lent is a time for putting aside some of our luxuries and distractions and asking ourselves what we're really all about. It is a time to foster a deep awareness of who we are and what God is calling us to be. It is NOT a time for shallow piety and self-absorbed spiritual exercises. It is a gift and an opportunity for us, as individuals and as communities, to rediscover responsible freedom and a new sense of meaning and purpose. For such a gift, and such an opportunity, thanks be to God today and every day.

AMEN.