

Growing up with God

A sermon preached by Geoff Oates Sunday 9th March 2014 (Lent 1)

“you may freely eat of any tree in the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in that day, you shall die”

Genesis 2.16

A father takes his young son down to Hartham common and says – you can go play anywhere on the Common, just don't go down to the edge of the river.

A mother says to her little daughter – you can take a sweetie from any of those boxes dear, except that one.

You know what's going to happen as soon as the parent's back is turned, don't you? Yes, someone's going to be coming back to the house with wet shoes and muddy trousers; someone's going to be munching mum's liqueur chocolates.

So when God told Adam and Eve they couldn't eat the fruit from THAT tree in the Garden of Eden, God really should have known what was going to happen.

On the first Sunday in Lent, let's take our thoughts back to the beginning, to Original Sin, where it all went wrong – **or did it?**

What is this story really about?

First of all, forget the fig leaves. Original sin has nothing to do with sex. Why are Adam and Eve forbidden to eat the fruit of the tree of Knowledge? Because it will make them like God, knowing the difference between what is good and what is evil. They will be able to make moral choices, they will have to make moral choices, and they will be able to get them wrong. My; how we've been able to get them wrong.

At one level, this could be a simple parable about growing up. Parents do all they can to stop their young children from causing harm to themselves or to others; they take

decisions on their behalf, forgive them easily when they break rules of behaviour that they cannot yet understand. But only for so long. A day comes when childhood innocence has to be left behind, because the real job of parents is not to keep their children safe and innocent, but to help them grow into responsible adults. **And why should it be any different for God?**

I can still remember my mother's back garden as a kind of childhood Eden. A safe, sunny enclosed place when adults looked over me as I played with my friends, if only from the windows of the houses behind us. But we got bigger. We were given bicycles, and one day we left the garden, literally, to explore the attractions of the neighbouring streets, away from the protective gaze of parents. Sometimes one of my friends played the role of the serpent, leading us off the safe path and er.. onto railway embankments, and into disused quarries. And sometimes the serpent was me.

And our parents worried about us, but they let us go. **Why should it be any different for God.**

And before I reached secondary school I'd already broken both my arms in separate accidents, and had the worst of an argument with a Morris Mini (fortunately one that was going fairly slowly when it hit me). The risks, the dangers, were not just the fruits of our overprotective parents' imaginations, they were very real; but still my parents let me go. **Why should it be any different for God.**

You can view Genesis 2 and 3 as a dramatic tale of human pride striving for equality with God and God handing out the terrible punishment of exile from Eden. Just like the story of Prometheus in Greek mythology. But you can also read it as the very understandable aspiration of bright eyed young children who sense that it **would** be good to be wise, to grow up.

I'm sure most of us were in a big hurry to grow up and be wise, but we probably didn't realise at first how much of growing up is about learning from your own mistakes. Sins, if you like the theological jargon. Lessons that are usually painful for us, and for those around us. And it certainly wasn't the broken arms that were the most painful ones for me.

'If you eat of the tree, that day you will die', said God. 'No,' said the serpent, 'you will not die.' Was God lying? Was it the serpent telling the truth?

'If you eat the fruit of that tree, you will die'. Just one of those silly things adults say to gullible children to make them behave? No, of course not. Our God is not a liar, he's not even an over-protective parent.

The Genesis story tells of two trees at the heart of the Garden of Eden, the tree of life and the tree of knowledge. It's one or the other. If you want to grow up, then you have to be ready to grow old. To watch things change, grow, and pass away. Embrace the cycle of life, with all its joys and pains – loves and friendships, rivalries and conflicts, work and play, children and families, loss and grief. All these things lie outside the Garden of Eden. Did Adam and Eve really choose wrong? Did God really mean to give us a choice at all?

Some say that the tale of the Garden of Eden is just one of many ancient stories that answer that old unanswerable question – why don't we live for ever.

One story, but not the full story; there is another, and better story still to tell. Mortality is not our punishment; for those who live and die in the faith of Christ, it is our reward. It is through mortality that we find our way forward – not back to childlike idyll of the Garden of Eden, but onward to a new, grown up and perfect happiness in the Kingdom of God.

God meant us to grow up. And he meant our love for him to be more than the love of a small child.

But let us remember that Adam and Eve were not God's first children. Begotten before the beginning of time, Christ, the Son, has also watched lovingly over mankind from the very beginning. If God the Father could no longer walk with his children in the Garden of Eden, he could still send his Son to walk alongside us, as a brother, in the rough and tough world we had to move out into; to share its dangers and face its moral choices, its temptations; to share himself the pain our mistakes cause ourselves and others, even the final pain of death on a cross.

It is His story we will hear as we go through Lent; a story that will also lead us to a garden – not a garden of lost innocence, but a garden with a tomb; a garden of New Hope, for there we will learn that our God is not a liar. Yes, like Adam we have eaten of the tree, and we shall die – but like Christ, our brother, who died on the tree, we shall live!

Amen

Reasons for marriage...

Studying our wedding photos, my six-year-old asked, "Did you marry Dad because he was a vicar?" "Not really," I replied.

"Did you marry him because he was good-looking?" "No, not that either," I replied.

"Did you marry him for his money?" "Definitely not," I laughed. "He didn't have any."

"So," he concluded sadly, "you just felt sorry for him."

Marriage

During a heartfelt chat with her friend about relationships, my wife sighed and said, "You know, if something happened to Lloyd, I don't think I could ever marry again." Her friend nodded sympathetically. "I know what you mean," she said. "Once is enough."