

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

WOULD YOU ADAM AND EVE IT?

We have just planted three apple trees in our back garden. At the moment, they are small and spiky, but we are very optimistic.

We have been taking advice from books, websites and garden centres about cordons, espaliers, fans, pollination groups and all the other surprising complexities of the fruit-growing process.

I'd like to be able to say the three trees – Bramley, James Grieve and Braeburn – were carefully picked out for us by a wise nurseryman whose grizzled complexion and battered tweeds spoke of a lifetime's communion with nature. In fact they were £3.99 each from ALDI.

It's impossible to talk about apples, even to look at an apple, without the story we heard today from early in the book of Genesis coming to mind. Adam, Eve, the Snake and the Apple are four characters in a story everyone seems to have heard of. Stop almost anyone in the street and they will be able to re-tell it even if they haven't heard it since Junior School assembly.

They will probably also be able to offer the default interpretation along the lines of temptation, the Fall and Original Sin. In passing into familiar popular culture, the story has become trivial. Everyone thinks they know what it says and what it means.

There is a pretty big clue that what we are reading here is mythology: and that's **the talking snake**. Animals only get to talk in a particular type of literature, such as Aesop's fables or Kipling's 'Just So' stories. This is no documentary about a conversation at the dawn of time; it's one of those legendary accounts of why things are the way they are: how the leopard got his spots, why the tortoise carries his house around on his back, why snakes crawl along the ground, why childbirth is painful, why living off the land is hard work.

The story is impossible, illogical, comical, and yet here it is in the canon of Christian scripture, alongside Chronicles and Kings, Psalms, Epistles and Gospels. It is a source of great wisdom about the human condition and a very useful way to start our journey through Lent, as long as we are willing to suspend our disbelief and accept the story for what it is.

We begin with a very simple relationship between God and the man and the woman he had created. They had a simple task, *Work the Garden and take care of it*, and there were some simple rules, *You can eat from any tree, except the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Eat that, and you will die*. No reason was given, and they didn't ask for one – well, you wouldn't, would you, on your first day in a new job?

Then the storyteller chooses the snake as the agent of what goes wrong. A wise choice, you might think, since a snake can be so smooth and silent, sliding up unnoticed until it is coiled around you and you are helpless.

Except that this snake presumably walked up to the woman, since it is only later in the story that God condemned it to crawl along the ground!

This remarkable, walking, talking, snake was also rather subtle: he said to the woman, *Did God really say you must not eat from any tree in the Garden?* God hadn't said anything of the sort – God had in fact been very positive, giving them a task, plenty to eat and a simple rule to follow – but the snake's question expertly implied a restrictive God who denies. How persuasive that picture of God remains to this day.

The snake then flatly contradicted God and accused him of a very ungodly motive. *You will not die; God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil*. The subtle suggestion is that God feared them, even envied them, and wanted to keep the privilege of knowledge hidden from them.

The snake never said to Eve “Go on, eat it.” He simply undermined the foundations of her obedience. That gave way as she reached her own conclusion that the fruit would be good to eat. And so they ate.

Now it comes as a bit of a shock to realise that the snake got it right. The consequences of eating the apple were what the snake said they would be.

They ate and they **didn't die**, (and if you had the Bible in front of you, you would see that this is exactly the opposite of the words of God in chapter 2 verse 17).

Their eyes **were opened** to knowledge as the snake said they would be; opened not to anything very profound, but to their own nakedness, which they set about covering with sewn-together fig leaves. (Fig-leaves apparently have a rather scratchy texture, so I hope it wasn't long before they found something more suitable.)

They did **become like God**: further on, beyond today's extract, we read: *The Lord God said 'The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil'*.

If the snake was right and God was wrong, then what on earth does that do to the moral landscape we think we live in? When we pray in the Lord's Prayer that God will "Forgive us our sins" we do rely on God not being envious or manipulative.

But reading further it becomes clear that the walking, talking snake wasn't completely right and that scratchy underwear was not the only consequence of humanity's new self-knowledge.

We soon see how things changed for Adam and Eve. They heard God walking in the Garden in the cool of the day and they **hid** from him. Something had gone wrong; that simple relationship at the start of the story had gone sour; they were afraid of God. Other relationships quickly went sour as well – as soon as God asked, *Who told you you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree...* Adam pointed to Eve and says, *It wasn't me, it was her!* And Eve pointed to the snake and says, *It wasn't me, it was him!*

So one good way of looking at the outcome is to say that, no, they didn't die in the physical sense, but in the sense of quality of life, in the sense of their living relationship with God, they **did** die. And that since we still feel a separation from God, it is natural and necessary to confess that separation repeatedly and ask for it to be made good. We fear that our living relationship with God gets weak and sometimes dies completely and we need it to be born again: praying and working towards that rebirth is a good Lenten discipline.

What about Original Sin?

Sin isn't actually mentioned in the story of Adam and Eve. And Adam and Eve barely get a mention in the rest of the Old Testament, so it's clear that the prophets and teachers of Judaism did not look back to these two sorry figures, falling from perfection, as exemplars of humanity's original disobedience which we all inherit.

Original sin is a very heavy and solemn construction to place on the good-natured and comic foundations of this story. I know that not all Christians accept this view of the book of Genesis, but to me the story of Adam and Eve is no more a factual account of the origin of our personal and social imperfections than Genesis chapter 1 is a reliable account of how the universe came into being. The world is the way it is – and I am the way I am – after a very long process of evolution in nature and in culture. We cannot pin the blame on a single, calamitous event long ago.

It's a mistake to say, "Ah well, in those days, people believed that kind of thing – we know better now." Absolutely not – I am certain that our predecessors on this journey were quite capable of distinguishing stories from poetry from factual records and

using them all to impart knowledge and wisdom and express themselves in worship. Just as we can.

The story of Adam and Eve is immensely wise about human nature – about how we want the things we cannot have, about how easily we fall into blame and misrepresentation, about our natural desire for self-sufficiency, about the risks that knowledge sometimes brings, about the mixed blessing of growing up into full self-consciousness.

For all that, it leaves us with the wrong picture of God, last seen closing the gate behind us as we are booted out of the Garden.

For God is, after all, not an excluder but an **includer** – one who invites us into his space, who calls us into his garden. Through the Sundays of Lent, as we follow Jesus towards the tragedy then the triumph of Holy Week and Easter, we will hear that call louder and louder.

AMEN