

Sunday 12th January 2020 - Sent from the Garden - (Gen 3:1-15 & John 1:29-34)

Last Saturday, we went as a family to see the Troy exhibition at the British Museum and it underlined the handout that I gave last Sunday on other religions' myths. The Hebrew creation story is unique but I found something at the exhibition that reminded me of it: a statue of Achilles with an arrow through his heel. A heel plays an important part in our story today.

Last week, we learnt from Genesis 1 that God made humans in his image and their main purpose was to reign over creation - animals and plants alike. We are his representatives on earth, created to be God's co-workers and to fill the world with good things. We understood that we can do that through tending, or caring for, the earth. But what does reigning over the animals mean? It's an ancient question that is still current today: what should humans' relationship with animals be? The Eden ideal is where humans peacefully coexist with the animals - where no creature should live at the expense of another's life, with God giving specific food for each species and all being plant-eaters. Yet a modern view of the biblical material suggests that humans are the problem when it comes to animal extinction ... that reigning has led us to abuse the animal world.

But now we come to Genesis 3... Adam and Eve have had the specific instruction from God that they can eat from any tree in the garden except the tree that will give them knowledge of good and evil... that seems pretty straight forward. They are used to walking with God in the garden, so it is likely that they have talked to him about it. Having been filled with God's breath of life in order to co-rule, humans then need to take up that responsibility to bear God's image and to rule, being a steward of creation on the creator's behalf and making decisions when they are needed. But to make decisions you need wisdom, which for them came through listening to God as they ate from the tree of life.

How did things go so horribly wrong so quickly? I can't imagine anything better than walking in the garden in the cool of the evening with the Lord... what an incredible thing to do. Yet, it would seem that that was not enough for Adam and Eve. They had been given the entire garden to enjoy, including the tree of life: they were just not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil since, if they did, they would die.

Let's stop a minute there... all of us who have had children have told them not to do something, haven't we, which they then immediately go and do? Even at a young age they think they know better. They do not want to listen to our wisdom. They choose another way.

Well so it was with Adam and Eve. Eve was approached by a snake that is not only more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made, but also talks and seems to know God's plans. The bible does not say how or why it got there. It presents this snake as a creature who is in rebellion against God - he is on a mission to ruin god's world for other creatures, getting humans to doubt god's goodness and submit themselves to him instead of God. He distorts what God had intended for good in order to get them to follow him on a path that leads towards death.

Listen again to what the serpent said: *"Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?"* **2** *The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden;"* **3** *but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'"* **4** *But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; 5 for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."* This is a half truth, but also a lie as it accuses God of being a killjoy, robbing them of freedom and fulfilment. "You could be God yourself. You

don't have to settle for mortality, depending on God's generosity, depending on God's wisdom. You can interpret good and evil yourselves and transcend your mortal limitations. Doesn't that sound great?" They fell for it and ate the fruit and instead of light and freedom, darkness and enslavement descended. Two immediate barriers came up...

- 1). Between Adam and Eve when they recognised that they were naked and ashamed.
- 2). Between humans and God as they hid from him in fear when he came to walk with them in the

garden. As Andrew Ollerton says, they were on "*the wrong side of the Creator and that is a scary place to be...*" Then came the judgement. Adam and Eve were banished from the garden of Eden because they chose to listen to someone else's ideas and not continue to trust God. They had fallen to temptation.

As we shall discover, God's plan for a good world was not going to be thwarted, but it had to change. If Adam and Eve continued to have access to the tree of life they could live forever in rebellion against God, which for the sake of them and his creation he could not allow. So, cut off from the tree of life, they began to die, first spiritually and then physically.. But death was not part of the original plan. How often do we feel when we attend a funeral that it wasn't meant to be this way?

A third barrier arrived when God judges what the serpent has done. God says, *I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and hers;* So from now on there will not be peace between animals and humans - humans will no longer be reigning over them and living in that peaceful existence as they have listened to an animal or something disguised as an animal rather than God. In fact they will live in fear and in competition with the animals both for land and for food. And, as an aside, I have always wondered whether our loathing of poisonous snakes - well, I can't stand any snake - comes from that.

But the story does not stop there... amongst the doom and gloom there is a promise of hope. God then said that there will be someone from the offspring of Eve: "*he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.*" Someone is coming, born of a woman, who will bring rescue. He will be wounded in the process - where? In the heel.. Where was Achilles vulnerable? Wonder where that thought came from? But he will crush evil and restore goodness to the world. So, right at the beginning of the Bible we get a glimpse of what, or rather who, is to come. And we also see him indirectly when God provides animal skins to cover Adam and Eve: an animal had to die to provide a covering for them.

We shall learn how animal sacrifice became a consequence of human disobedience and a sign pointing forward to the need for a worthy sacrifice who could deal once and for all with the consequences of sin. In fact we hear about it in our gospel reading today... "*Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*" So God made promises immediately, to give hope, but humanity had much to learn before the time was right for them to be fulfilled in Jesus.

Although banishment from Eden separated humanity from immediate access to God it gave them the opportunity to repent and be made right with him again. As we trace the story that follows, let us use it to learn of the ways God taught, supported and disciplined them as a loving parent, recognising ourselves at many points along the way. Death was never meant to be the end. Genesis 3 tells us that it came about because humans chose to believe that God could not be trusted. The rest of the Bible tells us that life is still our destination if we choose to put our trust in him.