

THE OLD ADAM AND THE NEW ADAM

Sermon preached at Christ's Church Cathedral, Hamilton, Ontario on the First Sunday after Lent, 26 February 2023, by Bishop Terry Brown. Lessons: Genesis 2: 15-17, 3: 1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5: 12-19; and Matthew 4: 1-11.

Rather than reflecting this morning on Jesus's three temptations in the wilderness, the traditional Gospel for this the first Sunday of Lent, I would like us to reflect a bit on St. Paul's Christian rabbinic reflection on the story of Adam and Eve, and Christ (and, indeed ourselves) as the new Adam: Christ's self-giving offering on the cross, God's outpouring of grace, and our ongoing transformation into new human beings, indeed, creation's transformation, new in Christ.

First, a few words about Adam and Eve, as recounted in our first lesson. First, of course, we know the story is not history, the way the historical figures in the Hebrew Scripture are. It is a sacred Jewish mythological story that tries to explain the origins of evil, pain and death: how there are evil and death in the world that was initially created perfect by a perfect God.

What is the story NOT about? There are a lot of mistakes in the popular imagination. It is NOT about sex. "The fall" has nothing to do with Adam and Eve engaging in sex for the first time and bringing down creation through responding to sexual desire, thus making the sexual act innately evil. The story is about disobedience, the failure to obey a divine command. The story is NOT about women as temptresses, leading men to sin, despite some later misogynist readings. St. Paul, in his rabbinic reflection this morning, does not even mention Eve; he speaks of Adam, meaning all of humanity, all genders. The story does NOT mean that snakes are cursed, despised, and meant to be killed. They too are an important part of God's creation. I even have a friend who has a snake as a support animal. We blessed it on St. Francis Day at Church of the Ascension a few years ago.

Is the story about "original sin," the belief that every human being deep down inside, just by virtue of being born and part of humanity, is sinful and has a proclivity to sin? (And by extension, some would say, making sexual intercourse the way that original sin is spread?)

The answer is a bit complicated. The western Church, especially through the theology of St. Augustine, developed a strong theology of "original sin," which was passed to and further developed by some Protestant Reformers, namely Calvinists, who spoke of innate "human depravity." However, the Eastern Church did not really develop the theology; their emphasis was on Transfiguration and Resurrection in Christ and the believer, which was permanent and did not need to go back to fallen humanity. One can see it in the liturgical vestments: the simple black Geneva gown of the Calvinists over against the glorious heavenlike vestments of the Orthodox.

There are strengths and weaknesses of both positions, and the extremes are to be avoided. The strength of the western tradition is that it recognizes that evil does exist and must be dealt

with. "We live in a fallen world," we sigh. But that does not deny "original blessing" (in Matthew Fox's phrase): that "original sin" does not obliterate the "original blessing" of creation, and in redemption through Christ, we are able to build on that "original blessing" and flourish abundantly. Even the Catholic Thomist tradition found extreme doctrines of "original sin" hard to stomach and the medieval Catholic church spoke of "grace perfecting nature," a view that Calvinists rejected as overly optimistic.

On the other hand, Orthodox denial of "original sin" can lead to triumphalism and a denial of sin where it is patently obvious. Surely Metropolitan Kirill of Moscow and Mr. Putin could use a dose of "original sin" in their theologies and practice. The inhumanity of war itself is testimony to original sin, not to mention imperialistic nationalism. I would say: let original sin stand, but it can be transformed. That is the point of St. Paul's reflection on Christ and the Cross today.

Today's reading from Romans is St. Paul's rabbinic reflection on Jesus as the new Adam, reversing the disobedience of the first Adam and its consequences. Interestingly, there is no place in the Gospels where Jesus refers to himself as "the new Adam." He was clearly familiar with the creation story – he refers to it in his teaching on divorce – but he saw himself as ushering in the divine reign of God that would sweep away all the sin and evil of the past in a restored Messianic order. So, Christ as the "new Adam" was implicit, not explicit, in Jesus's teaching.

St. Paul is reflecting on the obedient self-offering of Jesus, the Son of God, on the cross, and the grace that flowed from it. As Adam was disobedient, Jesus was obedient; and from that obedience to death, God raised Jesus to new life in the Resurrection. In our Christian faith, we are drawn into that divine mystery and offered free grace, forgiveness, and salvation. Here, of course, is the Paschal Mystery, to which Lent is an introduction. Our "old Adam," our old sinful humanity, is transformed into the new humanity, reflecting Christ's perfect humanity. In St. Paul's words, "Just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous." We are that "many," being made righteous.

As is often the case during Lent, a sermon about Lent turns into a sermon about Easter. What is St. Paul's message? Take and grasp the grace given to us in the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Forget the sins and pains of the past and grasp today and the world around us with all the self-giving love we can offer. We are part of the new creation. God is making all things new. Let us be a part of it. Let the grace of God heal our wounded memories and relationships. Reach out with Christ-like love. Do not place impossible burdens on people. Do not universalize our sad experiences and load them on to others. Live the Paschal mystery. Remembering Jesus's temptations in today's Gospel, avoid quick shortcuts to spirituality and ministry, and inordinate love of power and control. And in this Lenten season, reflect on where we are still "the old Adam," and how, through the grace of God, we might move more and more to be "the new Adam."

Today's Psalm says it all more graphically:

“Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven, and whose sin is put away!”

“Do not be like horse or mule, which have no understanding: who must be fitted with bit and bridle, or else they will not stay near you. “

“Be glad you righteous and rejoice in the Lord, shout for joy, all who are true of heart.”

Thanks be to God.