

Lent 1  
5/3/2017

Mark the Evangelist

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

Psalm 32

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

That sin is unnecessary...

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“Lead us not into temptation” we pray together most weeks, or, in the more recent translation of the Lord’s Prayer, “Save us from the time of trial”. There are two great temptation scenes in the Scriptures, both of which we have heard today. Both have about them a strong feel of the mythological, but this should not prevent us from hearing the truths they speak about who we are and how that ought to affect our actions.

The first scene is part of the second creation story, and is the exchange between Adam, Eve and the serpent which finally results in the expulsion of humankind from the Garden. This story sets the scene for what becomes the struggle of God with his human creation throughout the subsequent pages of Scriptures. The second momentous temptation is that of Jesus, referred to in Matthew, Mark and Luke, and described in Luke and Matthew as having three different elements – the temptation to create bread for his and others’ hunger, the temptation to “wow” the people with spectacular proofs of his divine identity, and the temptation simply to turn from God for great reward. These two stories must be read in tandem if we are to understand what it *means* to be “tempted”, and what resource God gives us in the face of the temptations which will inevitably come our way.

The apple-munching incident is easily read, and often understood, as a simple case of human disobedience, albeit with drastic consequences. Yet there is much more at stake than a simply failure to do as asked. Biting into the apple becomes *possible* because the First Couple allow themselves to be led into a questioning of the word of God. They have been told that all they need is theirs to take. That they are prohibited from eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is to say that they don’t *need* this fruit to be the perfected human creatures that they are. God has provided, and they are sustained. God has given and they have received, and all is right with the world.

In the story of the temptation of Jesus, a similar testing takes place, but with a different outcome. In each of his responses to the specific challenges of Satan, Jesus cites Scripture. But we shouldn’t imagine that this is to say that simply having a lot of texts up our sleeves is what is required to deal with temptation. (It might indeed be a great help, but it is not the heart of the matter!) More than simply quoting the *words* of Scripture in response to each temptation, Jesus stands on the *Word* – singular and complete – of God. This Word is not a text, but an address which names Jesus as “Son”. This has just been announced at his baptism – “This is my Son, the Beloved” – and Jesus answers by *being as* a son. This sonship, this foundational identity, is the ground on which Jesus’ stands against these temptations. (Jesus’ situation is not different from Adam’s, not stronger because of our confession about his special relationship to God. Jesus’ divinity springs from the word of the Father, from his confidence as a human being in God. It is because he trusts this word that he *is*, in the end, *the Word* [John 1].)

And so it is precisely in relation to Jesus' identity that the first two temptations begin: "If you are the Son of God, then..." Satan here seeks to *reinterpret* the meaning of this divine sonship for its consequences: "If you are the Son, could you not...?" In a sense, the challenge is: is it *enough* simply to *be* the Son of God; what shall you *do* about it?

The basic contrast between the two temptation stories, then, is that the first Adam fails to stand upon the sustaining word of God, and this word alone – "you are mine" – whereas the second Adam, clings to that word, overcoming the fundamental temptation to let go of the Word, and is the one who prevails.

This way of characterising these testings is helpful in that it gives us a different way of understanding what is at *stake* in temptation. In both stories giving in to the temptations is, ultimately, *unnecessary*. To put it most starkly, it is integral to the Christian understanding of command and obedience that is that sin is *unnecessary*.

Adam and Eve already have all that is necessary to be Adam and Eve. In their sin, which is a seeking of more than is required, they actually lose themselves because they lose that relationship of giving and receiving, of address and response, of trust between themselves and God by becoming the *judges* of God: "Did God say?"

By contrast Jesus, in resisting temptation, in refusing to grasp after the divine or to prove or test his identity (Philippians 2), is in the end *still* completely himself. There was nothing in what he was offered in the wilderness which could add to his identity before God. Bread from stone, swan dives off the Temple and the possession of all worldly power are unnecessary for Jesus to be in right relation to the God who sent him, for him to be his complete self. The address at his baptism has sustained him – "you are my son" – and continues to be true, despite his not having yielded to the testings of the devil.

As we heard in our reading from Paul this morning, he sees in Adam and Jesus two figures who are all-encapsulating of humankind. Paul draws a connection between Adam and Jesus, such that in Eden and then in the wilderness beyond the Jordan we have the First Adam, and the Last Adam, the First Man and the Last Man (cf. 1 Corinthians 15.45). Each is comprehensive of us all: Adam, in his being (with Eve!) the progenitor of all, and in his bequeathing the deathly effects of sin to all; and Jesus in the way in which those effects are stopped in their tracks, first in his own experience and then, by the grace of God, as a gift for all.

Yet the contrast is not simply between an obedient person and a disobedient one. The contrast is between one who is happy to rest in his identity as spoken by God and whose actions reflect such peace with himself and with God, and one who is not at peace with this identity, and acts to re-create himself. For Jesus, tempted at precisely the point of his relationship to God, this identity is sufficient: bread is not enough, but the Word of God; do not tempt God; worship God alone. For Adam having all that he needs is not enough – how much better to become like God.

The *bad* news in this story is Paul's observation that we bear a family resemblance with Adam. We are the Adamsons and share his lack of satisfaction in our identity as the image of God.

The *good* news is that a new image of God is given – a new humanity – which is Jesus the Christ, given as a reality as far-reaching in its effects for us as Adam has been in his sin.

The way to the cross we shall follow over the coming weeks is the kind of path we have to take in a world of Adams and Eves, if we are growing into the conviction that God's naming of us is more important than our own namings, God's aspirations for us more important than our own. This, paradoxically, is the path we must take if we are to be *free*. In the story of Jesus, as distinct from that of Adam, we see that kind of freedom, and we will hear that the declaration of "sonship" to which Jesus clung is also made to us: behold the manner of the Father's love, that the Adamsons might yet be declared the children of God!

With that declaration – with God's declaring to us, "You are my *daughter*, you are my *son*" – comes the testing of our *confidence* in that identity. For each of us, personally and as a community, those temptations will take a different specific shape but they will have the content, "*If* you are the son of God, *if* you are the daughter of God, do you not need to...?" The *If* implies the *Then*, the necessity.

Yet, when the tempting thought comes to mind, the question should be, "Will I be less if I don't? Will I be more – *really* more – if I do?" What life and freedoms might be had instead with moderation, or abstinence, or mercy, or chastity, or humility, or generosity, or... whatever other options also lie before me in this particular case? We are free to want many things; temptation begins when we begin to imagine that a *want* is a *need*, that selfishness, unchastity, pride or greediness might become *necessary*.

We will not always be confident whether we are dealing with needs or wants, that one action or another is the "right" response in our situation. But even here we are simply to hear the gospel again. As with Adam, so also again now – everything which matters is already yours, and for Adam's children now belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God (cf. 1 Corinthians 3.22f).

In this identity, we are *already* led from the force of temptation, saved in the time of trial, for God – the most fundamental of all needs – is already ours.

For the gospel of the Christ who triumphed in the face of hard testing, and for the grace of God which allows that his triumph might become ours, all thanks be to God, now and forever. Amen.

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