Lent 1 **Mark the Evangelist**
26/2/2023

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7
Psalm 32
Matthew 4:1-11

A tale with two beginnings

In a sentence:
The one temptation in life is to fear death in all its guises; in Jesus we see the freedom of denying death this power over us

Our readings this morning are part of a tale with two beginnings.

Adam and Eve and their apple, and the temptation of Jesus, are arguably the first things which 'happen' in each of the Old and New Testaments. And there is a clear correspondence between them – Eve in the Garden, conversing with the serpent and Jesus in the wilderness being challenged by the devil. The stories are strongly mythical but no less engaging for that, and part of that engagement is the similarities and differences between them. Perhaps the most apparent difference is that if the First Couple and Jesus undergo the *same* testing, Jesus comes out looking somewhat better than the other two!

What are we to make of that difference? A moral reading sees something heroic in Jesus' achievement. He reveals himself to be strong enough to resist temptation where Eve and Adam were not. For their failure, they are excluded from the Garden and die. *And yet* this is pretty much what happens to the *good* Jesus, despite his success. This means that if we read these temptations as moral testing, Jesus' experience contradicts any notion that moral success makes us safe: goodness doesn't preserve us.

Experience might already have taught us this, but the success of Jesus in resisting the temptations presents a problem with morality, in view of how he dies. This is the problem of theodicy. Theodicy asks about the justice of God: how can God be just if good people like Jesus suffer and die as he did? In the particular case of Jesus, tradition has found an answer which is deep in the Christian psyche: Jesus came *in order to die*. With this twist, the death of Jesus is no longer an affront to the justice of God but is, instead, God's own act: God 'sends' the Son, a 'ransom' for many. This is usually understood in terms of a sacrificial economy: Jesus is a sacrifice which does more than other sacrifices have done. How sacrifice was thought to work in Hebrew tradition is far from clear in the Scriptures, but that tradition is nevertheless used to interpret the death of Jesus, with the typical understanding being that *God* sacrifices Jesus. On this understanding, Jesus' triumph over the devil in the temptations proves that he is like an unblemished offering presented at the Temple: perfect, and so a worthy sacrifice to offer against so great a need.

Nonetheless, this kind of sacrificial understanding *doesn't* really work for us. Our occasional modern talk of sacrifice – the mother who sacrifices herself to save a child, or the sacrifices of soldiers in war – don't touch upon the same thing. For sacrifice adequately to explain for us how the death of one good person saves many un-good ones, we would have to come to faith in the old sacrificial system *before* we could believe in Jesus. For us today, this would be like taking sides against Paul in the circumcision debates (Galatians 2) – become a circumcised Jew first, and then Christ will be a benefit to you. Apart from that, we might also wonder why, if God is truly all-powerful, he cannot simply forgive, without killing Jesus. Theories about God's utter

holiness and the magical saving effect of blood to break through holiness into forgiveness can't make this question go away.

Jesus' achievement in the face of these temptations is undeniably a sign of his being and character. But we must also see that, in view of the cross, if he *is* a new beginning, even this demonstrated righteousness does not avert the cursed life and death to which Adam and Eve are consigned. This new beginning to the tale of God and the world does not quite undo the old beginning. So far as we can see, the deathly effects of the First Couple's apple-munching continue, even in the person of Jesus, said to be the "Son of God" ('*If* you are the Son of God…" the devil mocks). Our heartfelt 'What did *I* do to deserve *this*?' misunderstands the human condition: goodness is not salvation from this life. Goodness and innocence do not insure against suffering. This dismal conclusion is what sacrificial theories of Jesus' death try to avoid but, for the reasons we've already considered, these theories don't get us over the line these days, if they ever did.

We need another way of thinking about the ministry of Jesus from the temptations to the cross. So let's try this: the 'fact' that *even this righteous one* dies is a call to us *to be reconciled to death*. This brings both the first and second beginnings of this tale into the very centre of who we are, what we do, and what we expect to come – here and now. Given how the story is told, we cannot but conclude that Jesus – at least – was reconciled to death. This doesn't mean he was happy about it; 'take this cup away from me…', he prays in Gethsemane. But it does mean that death did not get in the way of him living the life-in-all-its-fullness of a child of God. Death did not force Jesus' hand. In the first beginning of this complex tale, Adam and Eve desire to 'be like God'. The distinction between them and God is, in the story, cast as the difference between a God who knows Good and Evil and the human beings who do not but desire to. But this is also the difference between a God who doesn't die and human beings who do. To be 'like God' is not to die, not to be a creature. Unlike Jesus, these two 'grasped' at being 'like God' (Philippians 2), and yet they die nonetheless.

Yet their death – and ours in the same way – is a corruption of death. No longer is death merely part of what they are as not-God creatures. Death is now something to be feared – a power to be avoided or wielded. In the scene which follows what we've heard today, they hide from God for fear of judgement (for they are naked and judge this in themselves). This kind of fear of God, and the pain death will now become, are two sides of the same coin.

It's within this reality that the second beginning of the story takes place: death has become a power to which people are subject, an horizon we know is there and work constantly act to keep away from. Fear of death and its many friends overshadows life, dividing and separating what God had joined together. Fear of death motivates invading armies and counter-offensives, causes us to lash out at each other after a hard day, and makes us greedy. Fear of death causes righteous people to crucify a righteous man.

In contrast, Jesus' responses to the devil show that he doesn't fear dying of hunger or the 'death' of failing in his ministry. Rather, he continues to live the life of a child of God. His path to the cross is no suicidal relishing of death, but simply the refusal to seek immunity to death. Jesus refuses to allow death to be a *motivation*. The life of a child of God is freedom not to be God, and a reconciliation to this *as* freedom: creatureliness means that we are not immune to death.

Someone once said that the Jesus who calls us bids us 'come and die'. This death is not suicide; it is a kind of 'death to death'. In its own strange way, of course, death frees us from from all ties; this is what we mean when we say, 'Rest in Peace'. But before this, in the life we are still living, to die 'to' death is to be set free from the *tie* of death, from the fear of it, from the willinginess to inflict it on others.

On this reading, the crucifixion is not the failure of goodness to bring us the reward of life. The crucifixion is Jesus' refusal to *fear* death, and so is his refusal to be *motivated* by it. On this reading, the crucifixion is not Jesus passively sacrificed like a coin spent in some economy of salvation. The crucifixion is the triumph of a human being living in the shadow of everyone else's fear of death. He dies because he does not fear death. The cross is Jesus' own death-to-death throughout the *whole* of his life, demonstrated in a 'real' death.

In the same way, Jesus' response to the temptations is a choice for life in the midst of invitations to fear death. This new beginning contradicts the first beginning, in which avoiding death by becoming like God seemed such a good idea.

To hear this tale with two beginnings opens up the possibility of a third beginning – indeed as many third beginnings as there are people who fear death in all its guises, whether the death which is the cessation of our breathing or the death which is some other constraint on life.

The 'No' of Jesus in the temptations is a reconciliation to the reality of death but a choice nevertheless to say 'Yes' to a life of free and open humanity. It is No to the shadow of death and a Yes to the light of life. It is a No to isolation and a Yes to mutuality. It is a No to hard justice and a Yes healing grace. It is a No to the gaslighting '*if* you are a Child of God' and simple, source-of-all-life reception of God's Child-making embrace in all hardship and all joy.

Jesus' No to the devil's life-sapping temptations is a No to fear and a Yes to the life God has given us to live.

We are Adam and Eve in the Garden, and Jesus in the wilderness, tempted to say Yes to fear.

But, faced with the choice, let us – in Jesus – say Yes to God, Yes to life.

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