

Lent 1  
22/2/2026

Mark the Evangelist

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

Psalm 32

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

Temptation, Sin and Mercy

Sermon preached by Rev. Em. Prof. Robert Gribben

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I am grateful to be invited to preach. It's now been 65 years, and as I prepared for today, I suddenly remembered that when I began, the biblical text we heard was from *King James Version*, 1611. Preachers also *prayed* in that language. Most of us had a lot of it by heart in its language and I still can't quote a modern version accurately.

So the unexpected blessing of this invitation was to prepare the texts which you have heard read according to very latest, but academically respectable, English version – because it is important that the translation be accurate to the original language and carefully put into the language of our world and our culture without distortion of what the authors wrote. We don't need it in American, which is a distinct kind of English, nor do we want it to be angled to the favoured theology of the interpreter.

That is why, early in its history, the Uniting Church formally recommended the use of the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV) of 1989. It was updated in 2021 and I used that. There was the *New English Bible* which excited us all in the 1960s, but its update, the *Revised English Bible* of 1989 failed to catch on (except for me!).

But to illustrate. Comparing translations of our so-well-known Genesis reading, the conversation between Eve and the serpent. Today you heard Eve reply to the Devil's prompt,

“God has forbidden us to eat the fruit of that tree [the tree of good and evil] or even to touch it; if we do, we shall die.”<sup>4</sup> But the serpent said to the woman, “Of course you will not die,<sup>5</sup> for God knows that as soon as you eat it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be *like God*, knowing both good and evil.”

Their eyes were opened. The shock of being naked was not Victorian modesty, but the realisation that their unseen embodied selves faced an unexpected long human life of a kind they had not imagined. They covered themselves up, perhaps not out of modesty but because they weren't quite ready for it.

By contrast, Jesus' confident response to the devil's wiles was:

“Out of my sight, Satan! Scripture says, ‘You shall do homage to the Lord your God and worship God alone’”.

All three of Jesus' 'tests' turn on the same act (temptations are tests, after all). It was Adam and Eve's test too: to seek salvation in our human selves, without God; to think that experiencing evil would be an advantage.

The new translations make it a lively conversation and not a 'sacred' text for pious people. And of course, we know that the stories in the first five books of the Bible were handed down by being told and heard by word of mouth *for centuries* before being written down and edited and translated into fresh tongues.

And I love what follows:

<sup>6</sup> The woman *looked at* the tree: the fruit would be *good to eat*; it was pleasing to the eye and *desirable for the knowledge* it could give, so she took some and ate it; she also gave some to her husband, and he ate it.

Her reasoning is revealing: it *looked* good (well, it was from God's own garden!) but - it also promised some '*benefit*' to the takers. That double reasoning plays a major part in sin of all kinds. There are consequences in a choice. And forget about laying blame on Eve: they both – as Paul writes, they together 'sinned as Adam did by disobeying a direct command'.

If you read ahead, you will meet the consequences of 'The Fall'.

I once interviewed Rabbi John Levi for the Christian Television Association in front of Arthur Boyd's vivid painting *The Expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden* (1947) which was no Eden - located in the wild Australian bush. We talked about the setting, and I retold the Genesis story for our unbelieving audience, and John stopped me. He said, 'You know what's a very *Christian* interpretation?' And he explained that for Jews, this chapter is not primarily understood as a story of man's fall, but *as the context of the first commandment* - 'Go forth and multiply' (Gen. 9:7). It was about grace, not sin. And law as grace.

II.

I sometimes wonder if that's why Paul wrote as passionately as he does in Romans about the great contrast between sin and grace – and again the translation is so uncluttered and clear:

<sup>16</sup> The gift of God is not to be compared in its effect with that one man's sin; for the judicial action, following on the one offence resulted in a verdict of condemnation, but the act of grace (Jesus' self-offering on the cross), following on so many misdeeds, resulted in a verdict of acquittal.

He even says it twice:

<sup>18</sup> It follows then, that as a result of one misdeed was condemnation for all people, so the result of one righteous act is acquittal and life for all.

I fear that good news has not always been echoed in Christian preaching.

And listen to today's psalm (32), in a modern version:

Happy the pardoned,  
whose sin is cancelled,  
in whom God finds  
no evil, no deceit.

It is an official Catholic version, and its heading reads,

*'A joyous hymn of thanksgiving for God's forgiveness. Sin concealed is a burden of misery; sin confessed frees from harm.'* (ICEL)

Rabbi Levi himself remarked, 'If there is a Fall in this story, it is a fall upwards!' A whole theological movement, Creation Spirituality, followed that view in the 1960s, led by a Dominican Friar, Matthew Fox. He opened the way to liberation theology, environmentalism and to reconsiderations of human sexuality – and is still popular as 'Green Theology'. It has produced some fruitful (!) ideas. It was also produced some dead ends. It tends to forget sin and evil and their effects.

The late Francis McNab once boasted that his congregation had not 'used those outdated *prayers of confession* for years.' There is a popular view among those who have left the Church that we *only* speak of sin. If our critics never experience our worship, they will never know our equal insistence on grace. e.g., in our liturgies of healing and personal reconciliation (sometimes called Confession) in *Uniting in Worship 2*, the last words said are: 'You are free! Go in peace in the name of God.'

There is a danger in replacing biblical language with psychological; grace cannot be reduced to therapy.

III.

But curious language can sometimes provoke us to think. I was reminded of one of the teasing sayings of that 14<sup>th</sup> English saint, Julian of Norwich, in her *Revelations of the Divine Love*. We all know her '*all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well*', but we don't all know what went before it. She wrote, '*Sin is behovely*'.

It's yet another old English word, meaning 'necessary' or even 'fitting', but Julian is not saying 'Sin is inevitable'. She means that sin has its uses: it can turn the mind, the heart, the spirit, to God.

Julian is struggling with an old question, one St Augustine wrestled with. If God is in, and is the cause of all things, where did sin come from? Why did Jesus have to suffer the cross? Julian's very questions lead her to the Good News: it is through God's passion that God's love is revealed. The sheer magnitude of God's love *would not have been made visible* without human sin. The parallel old saying is 'O happy 'fault', or 'O blessed Fall that gained for us so glorious a Redeemer'. It is a paradox, a mystery, if you like, and much more needs to be said and most theology is an attempt to say it.

Sin is behovely. But knowing that, all shall be well, indeed, 'all manner of thing shall be well'.

Thanks be to God.

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