

A Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent

The season of Lent is a time to reflect on human nature, and the passage from Genesis is an interesting one. In it, humanity eats the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

In eating the fruit of the tree, they opened Pandora's box, if I may mix my mythologies for a moment. This was an action which could not be undone, and affected not just those initial inhabitants of the Garden of Eden, but all of us. Humanity, from that point on, had to contend with the fact that they knew good from evil, and had to choose between the two. Humanity could no longer continue to live in ethical ignorance - we have to face the consequences of our actions, consequences that affect both ourselves and others.

However, I refuse to believe that this is a calamity. I will not condemn the man and the woman for their actions. Rather, I choose to see it this way: It is a moment that represents our maturing. Because they know good from evil, humankind has to learn how to function in ways which prioritise good and acts of compassion, empathy, kindness and grace, and to turn away from evil, from actions which damage, hurt, limit, destroy or harm others, or ourselves. This is such a significant step, but it is not a simple one to navigate.

It is a lifelong challenge. We face it every day, in small and large ways. Some are easy choices, some are almost agonising and take much deliberation. The important thing is that we make these decisions with the respect they deserve. And this takes effort, every single day.

So when you next have a moment when you have to choose whether to be the good person, or not, I hope that you will choose what you perceive to be good, but also enjoy the fact that you had to choose. Because the choice is meaningful, and important, and it says so much about who we are as human beings, and as individuals.

One of the questions I often ask myself when writing a sermon is this: where is the hope within this passage? What can I offer the congregation, and myself, that will sustain us in our journey of faith?

Some people may find the passage from Genesis difficult, because it can be read as a story of human disobedience and wilfulness, and the transgression of God's rule. Yet, humanity being placed on a road that allows them to choose acts of goodness is one where hope may be found.

The even greater hope that I will speak about can be found today comes from the Gospel passage, and the fact that Jesus himself faced the dilemma of choosing good over evil, and stands as an example of someone who was ever-willing to choose good, and to call out evil for what it was.

While he was in the desert, Jesus faced temptation. And he withstood it. He was resolute, but the temptation increased each round. The Gospel reports that he spent forty days and forty nights in the desert, which is a useful parallel to the duration of Lent – if Jesus can do it, we certainly can, especially if we have him as a guide to learn from and lean upon.

So we have in Jesus someone who is a guide and example for us. He knew the difficulties of human existence - he lived through them too - and he knew the importance of choosing what was good. He leads by example, and we can always look to him when we need to. His teaching was consistent – care for others, be mindful of your actions and their impact upon others, act from a position of love and empathy. This is a foundation upon which many things can be built, and they are grounded in the most significant thing possible - love.

Another important truth is this – we never fully know what others are going through. Which makes our compassion and empathy towards them all the more important. People have all kinds of struggles, problems, dilemmas and difficulties which they may never choose to disclose, and they do not have to, but the fact we don't know about them doesn't negate that they are carrying them. So be kind. Because you never know what another person is going through, and what impact your kindness will have upon them.

My prayer for us all in these early days of Lent is that we will choose good. Choose kindness. Choose empathy and compassion. Because that brings us closer to the God who gave us the skills to value those actions, and to understand their depth. May God be with us in this journey, and accompany us throughout these precious days.

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