

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 Romans 5:12-19 Matthew 4:1-11

Sin

It's the first Sunday of Lent, so let's talk about sin. Though, let's be fair, we are Christian, and the very heart of our faith is that Jesus Christ died and rose to save us from our sin — so sin, and our salvation from it, are at the heart of our thought every time we worship, even if we don't focus on it each time.

The readings from Genesis and from Matthew examine individual sin. Eve sees the fruit, the snake tempts Eve, lying and stirring covetousness, and the eating of the fruit, and then the sharing, the opening of Adam and Eve's eyes, the shame, the passing of the blame ('she gave it to me', 'that snake told me to do it.') and the consequences.

At the other end Jesus goes into the wilderness to commune with the Father, but the devil is also there, tempting him with forbidden fruit — using his power for his own gain, for his own fame, influencing the world through awe, not love. But where Adam and Eve capitulated to temptation, Jesus strikes it back with the straight bat of Old Testament law, and the strength of character that comes from being the son of God.

The first marks the beginning of the pandemic of sin, the second reading the beginning of the end — the formulation of the vaccine, as it were.

In between these points the Bible charts the spread of sin and its consequences. It charts the history of a nation that has the law, has the code for how to be good, but cannot even begin to get it right. The book of Kings, at the middle of the narrative, places the blame largely on the kings of Israel and Judah: if they had been God-fearing — it argues— they wouldn't have got into the mess they did. Come to the gospels and we see that at the crucifixion it is the only innocent person who is blamed for everything going wrong, while Jewish leaders and Romans attempt to wash their hands of any blame.

Seen in overview, this highlights the corporate nature of sin, which we very often overlook. Sin is, of course, personal. At confession no doubt you thought of some things with which you reproach yourself. But we rarely think of the way we are enmeshed in a society with such inequality and injustice, where black kids in London are more likely to get knifed than you are, and in which the poor are blamed for not working hard enough. This injustice is corporate sin. It isn't our fault, but we are involved — we aren't entirely innocent. We haven't put it right.

There was a book and film called 'The Corporation', released 20 years ago, discussing how if corporations were people, as they are treated in US law, then they would largely be psychopaths. It argues the case that while individuals take responsibility for behaviour, inside a corporation those individuals lose their identity and morality inside a machine that is focused on owner profits, and in which the size of the machine veils both the responsibility and the impact those decisions are having. That sounds quite extreme, doesn't it? But we can all see that global environmental damage is everyone's fault, yet most of us don't feel really personally guilty, and there's little we can do about it. For example — I know that driving a car puts harmful emissions into the atmosphere, but my job requires me to drive a car!

But the same is true of all of us. We daily take part in corporate, 'structural sin', from which we almost cannot escape. From the clothes we wear, to the petrol we use, it is almost

impossible to avoid colluding with injustices that put the first world over the developing world and the environment.

Ours is the same issue as that of the prophets railing against their godless kings and people — the kings had failed morally, but so had the people and it caused genuine suffering that was hard to put right.

What a Gordian knot! Who can cut it?

Enter Jesus, son of God, second Adam. As sin comes through Adam, so the 'vaccination' comes through the second Adam. As Adam's sin became corporate, so the Holy Spirit works a corporate cure. The work of Jesus was:

- to alert us to the problem of sin and give us discernment through the forgiveness of our sins.
- To demonstrably live the grace of God.
- to model Godly love, and positive goodness as the remedy for evil
- to give us the Holy Spirit, empowering us to do more good than we might ever achieve by simply trying to be good.
- to give us counsel when we do regularly fail
- to form us into a body — a corporation — so shaped in his image that although we do still fail, we are also transformative.
- And finally to give us hope: Jesus would not go to the cross if it achieved nothing, if it were to fail. He would not rise if God did not have power both to raise him and to save us.

Sin may be an enormous problem, but Jesus gives us an enormous solution, powerful, loving and liberating both for ourselves as individual, but also for us as a society, as a body — even as a 'corporation'.

A prayer:

Father God, this Lent we pray that by word and prayer, by meditation and action, we would see the wrong in the world and in ourselves, by your grace be part of your loving solution.

Amen.

SDG.