Sermon Sunday 24th Jan 2021 at Stowe

‘Eve’s Decision’: Genesis 3: 1-13; Luke 22: 3-6

The first two chapters of Genesis paint a glorious picture of how our creating God made a perfect world, with a man and a woman at the pinnacle of everything created. Not only was It all good but it was all ‘very good’. As we start chapter three, it begins to fall apart – so early, you might say. How could that happen to a perfect world?

Very early in the Bible we discover that, though God can do anything, he sometimes chooses not to do certain things, in deference to our free will. So he will never coerce us into anything; he will often persuade, but we always have a choice.

This is the third sermon in a series about Making Decisions. We’ve looked at Joseph’s decision before the birth of Jesus, and Elizabeth’s choice before John the Baptist was born. Today we look at the first ever decision any person ever made. Eve was faced with a choice, and she made the wrong one. And from that decision came the Fall and all that followed. Sin came into the world, and sin will remain in the world until the end of time, when Jesus will return to a new earth and set everything straight again.

Our story starts with a serpent, described as ‘crafty’. Other words that could be used include scheming, devious and sly. The serpent asked Eve a simple question which started ‘Did God really say…?’

He is questioning whether God really said it, and if so, why he should prohibit access to any of the trees in the Garden of Eden. Eve answered truthfully that God had allowed access to every tree except one – even *touching* that one tree meant death.

Then the serpent continued to question whether God really said it, or indeed really meant it. The serpent flatly denied it. ‘You won’t die,’ he said, contradicting what God had said, without any evidence whatever.

The tree of knowledge of good and evil could be considered the tree of knowledge of everything, which only God has. Mankind does not have such knowledge, because we are not God. The tree is at the centre of the garden – we are not at the centre. We must not seek to be the centre.

Let’s look at the serpent’s technique, because we are all tempted at times. This is a classic approach, which begins simply with a question: ‘Did God really say you must not eat of any tree in the Garden?’ That phrase ‘Did God really say…?’ is tempting Eve to mistrust a God who wants his creatures to have every good thing but denies them to eat from only one tree. Surely God wants the best for us? How then could he prohibit us from tasting from a tree which delights the eye and the taste buds? Surely God wouldn’t stop us eating from it?

If we’ve started to go down that road, we have already gone too far. Long before Moses received the Ten Commandments, God gave Adam and Eve one single, simple rule: call it a test of obedience if you like. In the Lord’s Prayer, it doesn’t say ‘lead us ***out of*** temptation’; it says ‘Lead us ***not into*** temptation’. If we are in a temptable position we have already strayed too far. Our prayer is that we don’t even get to that point.

And is it not in the little things we often fail? God can have sway over our whole life, we say, with the single exception of ***this*** area. This bit is ours and no-one can have it. It might be some habit, some possession, some secret sin, or even some bitter resentment. In the context of our whole life it can seem such a small thing – and yet it is at that one point that our trust in God is tested. If we will not let God be God in this one small, trivial yet so crucial a point, then we do not trust him where it matters most.

Our gospel reading is the account of how Satan entered into Judas Iscariot, and how Judas then looked for a way to betray Jesus. In the Genesis reading, there is no mention of Satan, but the implications are clear: the serpent embodies all the worst characteristics of the devil. In fact, there is no mention of Satan in the Bible until the book of Job. And apart from Job, there are only four mentions of ‘devils’ (not ‘The Devil’) in the Old Testament. (Incidentally, there are in the Bible only two references to ‘archangel’ – in 1 Thessalonians and in Jude – both in the singular, Jude naming him Michael.)

When we are caught out in a sin, it is always – ***always*** – best to own up straight away. No, it’s not easy, and yes, it’s embarrassing – but not to own up leads to far more problems:

*What a tangled web we weave,*

*when first we practise to deceive.*

What happened next? Having both eaten the fruit (which is never defined, either as apple or anything else), there are immediate consequences. First they realised they were naked and so made ‘aprons’ for themselves. Then, when God turned up for his habitual chat at the end of the day, they were nowhere to be found. They had hidden. Not only did they make clothes because they did not want to be seen by each other, they hid from God for the same reason. Eating the fruit had brought shame into their lives. Originally they were described as ‘naked and unashamed’. Now all that had changed.

The subsequent conversation between God and the couple was painful to all of them. God called to the man first: ‘Where are you?’ And Adam had to admit to his shame because he was naked, and so he hid. ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree?’ said God, going straight to the point.

Listen to Adam’s response. He didn’t say ‘Yes’ and he didn’t say ‘No’. He blamed the woman for leading him astray. I’m sure there’s a whole sermon series on that alone, but let’s stick to the point. When God tackled the woman on the same issue, she didn’t say ‘Yes’ and she didn’t say ‘No’ either. She blamed the serpent for leading her astray.

What is God to do? It must have broken his heart to see his perfect creatures deceived and corrupted like this. So he went first to the serpent and condemned him, then to the woman and judged her, and finally to the man and gave his final judgement.

What are we to make of this story? Is it fable? It’s obvious that no-one was there at the time writing down exactly what happened, just like the story in Genesis 1 and 2 about the creation. But this does hold up as a plausible explanation of how sin came into the world. Some think that the Bible is just a single universal story, beginning with everything perfect and ending… with everything perfect (‘Eden restored’, as the hymn-writer put it), and that this was God’s plan from the start.

We can draw a number of lessons from Genesis 3. We will be tempted to do and say and think wrong things, and some temptations will be very subtle. We will all fail God at times in our lives. It’s best to own up straight away, ‘keeping short accounts with God’ as they say.

Sin has consequences. You can be forgiven for sinning but sometimes the consequences can’t be put right and you have to live with them. If a driver distracts themselves from the road with their mobile phone, and as a result causes an accident in which someone dies, they may possibly be forgiven by the family concerned - but that doesn’t bring back the loved one who died.

But there is good news. There is a way back when we fall into temptation. There is someone who stands as Mediator on our behalf. We can be ‘clothed’ in his righteousness, the acceptance, forgiveness, love and peace of his gospel, and the power of the resurrection, bringing life back to the dead. Through Jesus Christ, the second Adam, life can begin again. Through him, the way can be made open again to the Tree of Life. Through him we can know our Creator once more as our Father, and in the fellowship of his Body can begin again to be made whole. For the words ‘Where are you?’ are not only words of judgement; they are primarily words of love. The Father looks out for his son and welcomes him back to the feast.