

Some thoughts on the Lectionary Readings for Year B – First Sunday in Lent (2nd Service)

Lectionary Readings: **Genesis 2: 15-17; 3: 1-7**
 Psalm 119: 17-32
 Romans 5: 12-19
 Luke 13: 31-35

There is a direct link between two of the readings this week – the account of the ‘Fall of man’ in Genesis and Paul writing to the Romans of ‘Death through Adam, life through Christ’.

Much of Genesis is a ‘historical account’ of events – e.g. the Creation story culminating in the creation of the human race in Genesis 1. It is likely that the author of Genesis had access to earlier ‘accounts’ or ‘histories’ – some scholars have identified four different writers; J writer, who referred to God as Jahweh; E writer, who used the generic name for God, Elohim; D writer, principally responsible for later history in the Book of Deuteronomy; P writer, giving material from a Priestly stand-point. It is quite possible that some of these had prior knowledge of and were influenced by the others!

In Genesis 1 26-27 we read:

²⁶ Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’

²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; **male and female he created them.**

Genesis 2 has an alternative account of creation, commencing in verse 4:

Adam and Eve

⁴ This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the LORD God made the earth and the heavens.

⁵ Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth^[a] and no plant had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground, ⁶ but streams^[b] came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground. ⁷ **Then the LORD God formed a man^[c]** from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

⁸ Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. ⁹ The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground – trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the **tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.**

¹⁰ A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. ¹¹ The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. ¹² (The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin^[d] and onyx are also there.) ¹³ The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush.^[e] ¹⁴ The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Ashur.

And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

Footnotes

- a. [Genesis 2:5](#) Or *land*; also in verse 6
- b. [Genesis 2:6](#) Or *mist*
- c. [Genesis 2:7](#) The Hebrew for *man (adam)* sounds like and may be related to the Hebrew for *ground (adamah)*; it is also the name *Adam* (see verse 20).
- d. [Genesis 2:12](#) Or *good; pearls*
- e. [Genesis 2:13](#) Possibly south-east Mesopotamia

Our reading today started at chapter 2:15 and left out verses 18-25 which give the ‘alternative’ creation story for Eve:

¹⁸ The LORD God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.’

¹⁹ Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. ²⁰ So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.

But for Adam^[a] no suitable helper was found. ²¹ So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs^[b] and then closed up the place with flesh. ²² Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib^[c] he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

²³ The man said, ‘This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called “woman”, for she was taken out of man.’

²⁴ That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

²⁵ Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

Footnotes

- a. [Genesis 2:20](#) Or *the man*
- b. [Genesis 2:21](#) Or *took part of the man’s side*
- c. [Genesis 2:22](#) Or *part*

Both verses 8 and 15 have God placing man in the garden in Eden – the Garden of Eden. In verse 9 we read of two types of tree found in the middle of the garden – ‘The Tree of Life’ and ‘The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil’. Reading further in chapter 3 we find a consequence of ‘the Fall’ and a further reference to ‘The Tree of Life’:

²¹ The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them. ²² And the LORD God said, ‘The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live for ever.’ ²³ So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. ²⁴ After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side *(or in front)* of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.

Ezekiel 47 records a vision received by the prophet – ‘The River from the Temple’. Towards the end of that vision we read:

¹² Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear fruit, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing.’

Ezekiel does not describe ‘Trees of Life’ but the description matches that of St John in his ‘Revelation’ - a vision at the end of time when God has fulfilled His purposes through Jesus:

Eden restored

22 Then the angel showed me **the river of the water of life**, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ² down the middle of the great street of the city.

On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month.

And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³ No longer will there be any curse.

The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city (*the New Jerusalem*), and his servants will serve him.

⁴ They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵ There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

⁶ The angel said to me, ‘These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God who inspires the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place.’

‘The Tree of Life’ is there in the first garden and also at the end in Eden restored; between is wilful man. We are only told that God forbade eating from the ‘Tree of Life’ **after** Adam and Eve had eaten from ‘The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil’. Ezekiel and John, in their visions, see man restored with God and ‘The Tree of Live’ providing both food and healing.

Eve was tempted by the snake or serpent. A footnote in the NIV Study Bible notes:

The great deceiver clothed himself as a serpent, one of God’s good creatures. He insinuated a falsehood and portrayed rebellion as clever, but essentially innocent, self-interest. Therefore “the devil, or Satan” is later referred to as “*that ancient serpent*” (Revelation 12:9; 20:2).

How do you look at this passage in Genesis? For some it is a literal account of attack by a personal “Devil”, an attack by “Satan”. For others the account will be seen as an example of the free will each human experiences and the desire to go our own way, set our own rules and perhaps not even acknowledge the existence of God. As the Lord said (3:22), “*The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil*”.

‘Following the devices and desires of our own hearts’ or attacked by ‘Satan’ has the same end result of separation from God – as Paul expressed it – the way of man, of Adam, leads to death.

Which brings us to Paul’s letter to the Romans. Sin entered the world through one man, Adam. Sin continues to enter the world every day when we as members of the human race (the ‘descendants’ of Adam) follow those of our own interests and desires that are contrary to the Will of God.

Paul argues initially from his ‘academic’ background as a Pharisee – sin existed before the Law was given (from Adam to Moses) but a person could only become ‘guilty’ when the Law was revealed and in place. He then goes on to Make a contrast with God’s grace:

¹⁵ But the gift is not like the trespass. **For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!**

¹⁶ Nor can the gift of God be compared with the result of one man’s sin: the judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification.

¹⁷ For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God’s abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ!

At this early stage in Lent 2021, as we prepare to celebrate the Sacrifice of the Cross and the triumph of the Easter Day Resurrection, may we reflect again on the thought that “Human desire and will bring death, life only comes through Jesus”.

Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us
o’er the world’s tempestuous sea;
guard us, guide us, keep us, feed us,
for we have no help but Thee,
yet possessing every blessing
if our God our Father be.

Saviour, breathe forgiveness o’er us;
all our weakness Thou dost know,
Thou didst tread this earth before us,
Thou didst feel its keenest woe;
tempted, taunted, yet undaunted,
Through the desert Thou didst go.

Spirit of our God, descending,
fill our hearts with heavenly joy,
love with every passion blending,
pleasure that can never cloy;
thus provided, pardoned, guided,
nothing can our peace destroy.

James Edmeston

We return, today, to sections of Psalm 119 – the longest in the Bible. As described before, this psalm is a very involved and elaborate acrostic based on the Hebrew alphabet. There are twenty-two eight verse sections, a total of 176 verses. The two sections that have our attention today are those based on the third (**ג Gimel**) and fourth (**ד Daleth**) letters of the alphabet.

The Introductory note to verses 17-24 (the third section) in the NIV Study Bible reads:

Devotion to God's law marks the Lord's servant, but alienates him from the arrogant (v.21) of the world

A similar introduction to the fourth section (verses 25-32) has:

Whether "laid low" (v.5) or "set.....free" (v.32), he is determined to "hold fast" (v.31) to God's word.

There is a translation difference between the text in the NIV Study Bible and the NIV-UK version. Verse 32, mentioned above reads as follows in the two translations:

(NIV-SB) *"I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free"*

(NIV-UK) *"I run in the path of your commands, for you have broadened my understanding"*

Most translations of this verse speak of enlarging the heart and a smaller number of increasing understanding.

Both sections express times of difficulty but emphasise a desire to meditate on the decrees and deeds of the Lord. There are many specific requests to the Lord but also an underlying confidence, whatever the situation:

ג Gimel ³ Though rulers sit together and slander me, your servant will meditate on your decrees.

²⁴ Your statutes are my delight; they are my counsellors.

ד Daleth ²⁷ Cause me to understand the way of your precepts, that I may meditate on your wonderful deeds.

³⁰ I have chosen the way of faithfulness; I have set my heart on your laws.

³¹ I hold fast to your statutes, LORD; do not let me be put to shame.

³² I run in the path of your commands, for you have broadened my understanding.

The well-known, 'modern' paraphrase of the Bible – The Message – renders these two sections in a way which gives a simple understanding of the psalmist words and may bring insight to us:

¹⁷⁻²⁴ Be generous with me and I'll live a full life; not for a minute will I take my eyes off your road.

Open my eyes so I can see what you show me of your miracle-wonders.

I'm a stranger in these parts; give me clear directions.

My soul is starved and hungry, ravenous! — insatiable for your nourishing commands.

And those who think they know so much, ignoring everything you tell them—let them have it!

Don't let them mock and humiliate me; I've been careful to do just what you said.

While bad neighbours maliciously gossip about me, I'm absorbed in pondering your wise counsel.

Yes, your sayings on life are what give me delight; I listen to them as to good neighbours!

* * *

²⁵⁻³² I'm feeling terrible—I couldn't feel worse! Get me on my feet again. You promised, remember?

When I told my story, you responded; train me well in your deep wisdom.

Help me understand these things inside and out so I can ponder your miracle-wonders.

My sad life's dilapidated, a falling-down barn; build me up again by your Word.

Barricade the road that goes Nowhere; grace me with your clear revelation.

I choose the true road to Somewhere, I post your road signs at every curve and corner.

I grasp and cling to whatever you tell me; GOD, don't let me down!

I'll run the course you lay out for me if you'll just show me how.

At the beginning of the reading from Luke 13, Pharisees come to Jesus and ask/instruct Him to leave "this place" because "Herod wants to kill you." Were they really concerned for Jesus or did they just want Him away from 'their patch'?

The passage immediately before our Gospel reading is typical of the teaching that so infuriated and alienated the Pharisees:

The narrow door

²² Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem.

²³ Someone asked him, 'Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?'

He said to them, ²⁴ 'Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.'

²⁵ Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, "Sir, open the door for us."

But he will answer, "I don't know you or where you come from."

²⁶ Then you will say, "We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets."

²⁷ But he will reply, "I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!"

²⁸ There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. ²⁹ People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God.

³⁰ Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last.'

Jesus gives a reply to the Pharisee's demand that He should go away - a reply that is to be conveyed to Herod who He describes as 'a fox' – a crafty animal.

(Matthew's Gospel records that news of Jesus, His preaching, teaching and healing came to Herod after he had executed John the Baptist. He believed that John had come back from the dead because of the miraculous powers that were being displayed. I can imagine the news of Jesus' activity must have greatly disturbed the Tetrarch.)

Jesus will continue this activity; the phrase - "*today and tomorrow*" - we are told could, in Semitic usage, mean an indefinite but limited period of time. There was a finite time left on earth; His life would culminate in Jerusalem where many prophets of the old age had also perished. Until that time no opposition would stop Him – there is, we realise, significance in "*reaching my goal on the third day*"; a significance which would have been lost on those listening to Him as he replied to the Pharisees.

The passage ends with the well known 'Lament for Jerusalem'. One commentator notes the phrase "*how often I have longed to gather your children together*" and follows with speculation that Jesus may have been a more frequent visitor to Jerusalem than the Gospel Records suggests.

In the final verse He, like many Old Testament prophets, declares that Jerusalem and the Temple will be abandoned:

⁷ I will forsake my house, abandon my inheritance; I will give the one I love into the hands of her enemies.
(Jeremiah 12)

Jesus goes on to refer, obscurely, to His arrest and execution then declares that when He is seen again the people will shout words from Psalm 118. It is interesting to note the verses in the psalm that immediately precede this 'quotation':

²² The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone;

²³ the LORD has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes.

²⁴ The LORD has done it this very day; let us rejoice today and be glad.

²⁵ LORD, save us! LORD, grant us success!

²⁶ **Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.** From the house of the LORD we bless you

Did Jesus have this in mind when he quoted verse 26 – declaring that He was, as we know today, the cornerstone?

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus blood and righteousness
I dare not trust the sweetest frame
But wholly trust in Jesus name
My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus blood and righteousness
I dare not trust the sweetest frame
But wholly trust in Jesus name

*Christ alone, Cornerstone
Weak made strong in the Saviour's love
Through the storm, He is Lord
Lord of all*

When darkness seems to hide His face
I rest on His unchanging grace
In every high and stormy gale
My anchor holds within the veil
My anchor holds within the veil

Christ alone, Cornerstone

When He shall come with trumpet sound
Oh may I then in Him be found
Dressed in His righteousness alone
Faultless stand before the throne
nnnnnnnn

Christ alone, Cornerstone

Edward Mote, Eric Liljero, Jonas Myrin, Reuben Morgan & William Bradbury
(Hillsong Worship)