

Genesis 3; Luke 4:1-13

Do you believe in Father Christmas? No? That's sad – I certainly do! And before you conclude that I have finally entered my second childhood, let me explain. By 'Father Christmas' I do NOT mean a rotund figure dressed in red driving a team of reindeer round the sky and squeezing down chimneys in order to stuff stockings with presents and himself with mince pies. This explanation of the mystery of piles of presents appearing on Christmas morning becomes unbelievable once we get to an age when we begin to seek for a *rational* explanation as to how things happen. No – by 'Father Christmas' I mean the love, effort, and sometimes self-sacrifice which motivate the giving of gifts, all symbolized in the happy, smiling, red-robed figure. 'Father Christmas', in other words, is a myth which, like all myths, attempts to explain our world – to explain nature or, in this case, *human* nature. When I say that I believe in Father Christmas, I mean that I believe that in most of us there is an instinctive impulse for generosity, a desire to relate to and to love others. The myth is a way of expressing a reality.

Now you may wonder why I am talking about Father Christmas in early March. The Church's seasons do get a bit compressed in College life, but we are now in Lent, not Advent, and should surely be thinking about sin and forgiveness, Good Friday and Easter Day, not about Christmas. My excuse is that in our first reading this evening we heard another myth – another attempt to explain human nature – although, because it is in the Bible, we do not always recognize it as myth. Some people, of course, do take the story literally, but doing that raises all sorts of problems, not simply at an historical

level, but at the theological level as well. Are we really expected to believe that all the disasters in this world – the woman with inoperable cancer, the child dying of hunger, the thousands struck down by covid – are the result of a mistake made by one man, Adam, and the punishment meted out to him and all his descendants by a wrathful God? Although humanity *can* be blamed for much of the misery in this world, as we are at present all too aware, the idea that suffering and death were the result of Adam's sin is not only historically impossible but theologically reprehensible. So what is this story trying to tell us?

The story of the Fall in Genesis tells us how Adam came to disobey God by eating the forbidden fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The Hebrew word 'Adam' can be used as a name to refer to an individual, but it also means 'humanity', both male and female. Perhaps this story is not about one individual then, but about the experience of the human race, and about our own experience as individuals. In theological language, it tells us how God's intention for humanity was devastated by sin; earlier in Genesis, we learn that God had created men and women in his own image, but now, human beings turn away from God. Genesis 3 describes how, confronted by a choice, we so easily make the *wrong* choice.

The story of Eden depicts Adam and Eve living in innocent bliss. Sadly, none of us can remember the time when we were innocent children, naked and unashamed, unaware of the problems of the world in which we live. But at some point we became aware that we were being confronted by choices – and that those choices sometimes led to good and sometimes to evil. We discovered the notion of conscience, and the feeling of shame when we made

a bad choice; we developed relationships with others and learned that they had needs and desires, just as we did; we discovered that life brings suffering and danger, death and grief. William Blake's 'Songs of Innocence' were replaced by 'Songs of Experience'.

In the story we hear how Adam disobeyed the command of God by eating the fruit of the forbidden tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Satan, the personification of temptation and evil, disguised as a serpent, tempted Eve, and through her Adam, to take the fruit, and Adam, typically, blamed his wife. She blamed the serpent. And generations of men and women tended to blame God for inflicting such harsh punishment. Adam turned his back on God, and so ceased to reflect the character of a loving and just God; he pursued – as he thought – his *own* welfare. He centred his life on himself, and loved himself instead of loving others, and the result was devastating – his own misery and the abuse, misuse, exploitation, and even destruction, of other human beings. We do well not to ignore this myth, for it expresses the truth about ourselves.

Adam is indeed everyman; think for a moment of those who pursue wealth without any concern for those they impoverish or the long-lasting effects of their actions on the world; think for a moment – how, indeed, can we not? – of those who pursue power and reputation without any concern for those who suffer as a result of their actions; think for a moment of our own manner of life and our lack of concern for those who do not enjoy what we take for granted.

Our second reading was set, not in Paradise, but in the wilderness, the very opposite of Paradise. But Satan reappears, in order to tempt – or test – Jesus, just as had tempted Adam and Eve. Satan tries to persuade Jesus to turn stones into bread, in order to satisfy his hunger; to throw himself off the top of the temple, in order to persuade the people of his power, and to worship him; if he does *that*, then Jesus will have control of all the kingdoms of the world. If we think the story does not reflect our own world, think again. We may not imagine that we are able to turn stones to bread, but we live in a world where we are constantly bombarded by suggestions that encourage our greed by urging us to enjoy more and more possessions and indulge our own desires, while millions starve and attempt to satisfy their hunger by chewing on wood and leaves. We live in a world where thousands seek fame, and want to make a name for themselves by becoming celebrities. There is nothing wrong, of course, with enjoying the good things of life; nothing wrong in seeking self-fulfilment – unless we think *only* of ourselves, and forget others. To worship Satan means to abandon the things that mark us out as created in God's image; to replace the love of God and love of others with love of self. It is to assume that *we* are the centre of the universe, and that others exist in order to serve us.

In our Genesis story, Adam is tempted to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The choice between good and evil may appear straightforward, but it is not always easy to distinguish between them. Here is a light-hearted example that is entertaining film-goers at the moment: Kempton Bunton, a 60-year-old taxi driver, steals Goya's portrait of the Duke of Wellington from the National Gallery in London; theft, as we all know, is wrong, but his motive, to give senior citizens free TV licences, is

praiseworthy: was his action good or evil? More up to date are the protests made by Extinction Rebellion and Insulate Britain – more good motives, but are their activities good or evil? And at a far more serious level, we have the problem facing Ukrainian patriots at the present: do they give in to Russian aggression, flee their country, or take up arms to defend their fellow-citizens and fight the invaders? Which action is good and which is evil?

Discovering the difference between good and evil *can* be straightforward, but often it is not. What the Genesis myth suggests is that the clue to deciding what is good had already been given to Adam. Created in the image of God, he had reflected the character of God, who is loving, caring, forgiving, just. If Adam had followed that pattern, he would have chosen the good. But once he put himself and his own desires and ambitions first, his judgement was distorted, and his guiding principle became 'Me first'. By contrast Jesus, offered personal satisfaction and achievement, fame and power, insisted that one must worship – that is honour – God alone. He chose to love others, not himself, and his decision meant rejection, suffering, death – and the final triumph of good over evil. The choice that confronted them – and us – is ultimately the same: is our primary concern to satisfy our own desires, or to bring love and justice to others?