

9th June 2024

Genesis 3.8-15 O.T. p.2

Mark 3.19b-35 N.T. p 31

Surprise, surprise...

Gracious God, May your Living Word come to us afresh this morning. So, touch, we pray our minds and hearts with your grace and truth. Through Christ our Lord and in the power of your Spirit. Amen

Every week in church we base our sermons on what's called the Revised Common Lectionary, a three-year programme used by churches all over the world looking at set passages of scripture. Today's text from the Old Testament is of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and from the New Testament of Jesus and his family. Many of you will have heard loads of sermons based on the Common Lectionary, so it's always the preacher's task to try to dig a bit deeper, sometimes taking a sideways look at these stories, in order to shed a bit more light on very familiar texts. And in that process, we often get surprises that help us see things a little differently.

The first surprise that strikes me this morning is the fractured relationship between Jesus and his family described in today's gospel. They thought he was *out of his mind*, and they wanted to stop him.

The family is such an important unit in Judaism. Meals of faith are just as much celebrated around the table at home as they are in synagogue. So, we might have expected that Jesus' experience of family would have been thoroughly positive. The surprise is it wasn't, and perhaps we find that unexpectedly reassuring.

Our eldest son is a trained FIFA referee for junior football league matches and I've attended some of the games he oversees. I remember one with a very vocal parent next to me who spent the whole time shouting at his son, telling him when to pass the ball, when to tackle and, more than once, where he'd gone wrong. It seemed obvious to all of us, but him, that his son was not only very bad at football but plainly didn't like playing it. The father was obviously inappropriately living out his own dreams and in doing so placed an impossible burden on his poor son's shoulders.

At their best families offer that safe and encouraging nurturing space in which children grow into their true selves. Yet, that may not always be the case. Families can also at times forcefully present a child with a prescriptive culture that has the sub text *This is how we expect you to develop, you must become like us because, whatever others say and whoever you feel you are inside, our way is the only way.*

Jesus, in the eyes of his family, was now acting strange. He'd deviated from the path they expected. He'd become too outspoken and his radicalism, they thought, now threatened both his and their reputations. So, they track him down hoping to reign him in. Enough is enough they say.

I am sure Jesus had lived faithfully as a child under his Jewish tradition and had striven to uphold the concept of honouring his father and mother. Yet now, it was time for his remaining parent, Mary, to honour him and all he stood for in his adult years. In family relationships respect needs mutuality and that can be especially strained for a parent when their child is transitioning into an adult.

Mary had started well. The words of The Magnificat show so much hope for her yet unborn son. These words are as powerful as they are radical, yet it was never going to be easy to witness them being put into practice by an adult Jesus. So, as the stakes get higher, we are somewhat perplexed to see that it is, in fact, Mary who spearheads the intervention designed to gag him. Mary sides with her other children in trying to stop Jesus.

The story of Billy Elliot made for a great film. This northern lad, keen on ballet becomes a mystery to his father, who tries to block his progress even though it's clear to so many that Billy is an exceptionally gifted dancer. Yet this wasn't the culture of Billy's family with his dad who never seems to catch up with the pace of things. Undeterred Billy fulfils his dream even if it didn't fit with his father's expectations.

Well, if you haven't seen the film there now comes a spoiler alert! It ends fast forwarding to an adult Billy dancing on stage in London in Matthew Bourne's Swan Lake and we think it's the end of the movie. Until the camera pans round to the audience and there in the front row is his father, now watching his son with tears of pride falling down his cheeks. A great ending with a profound message.

So, after this mistaken period in her life when she doubted her son, Mary surprises us in Holy Week. For her story foreshadows that of Billy Elliot's father, fast forward to the cross and who has, as it were, the front seat looking up with falling tears but Mary. She got there in the end and Jesus had no more faithful disciple than her. Not at first maybe, but eventually, Mary lets her son become the one he was destined to be. And in that she showed inspirational love and remarkable insight.

A leading Oxford professor said he recently asked the CEO of a worldwide drug company why, during the Covid Pandemic, they had decided to offer, initially at least, their vaccine on a not-for-profit basis. The CEO said, *if I had done anything else my kids would have killed me!*

Sometimes the younger generation can become our greatest teachers. And that, I think, was Mary's surprising experience.

So, what are we to make of the lectionary organisers selecting this passage from Genesis 3 to go alongside today's Gospel?

Traditionally we call it the *Story of the Fall*.

It's like a piece of poetry, a tale from the days of Pre-History with images of a garden, forbidden fruit and talking reptiles. It's a myth with a message, but what is it trying to say to us?

Well, the second surprise that strikes me this morning is that maybe this story has

something more positive to say to us than just being a picture of so called failure.

Some bible commentators encourage us to think of it as a sort of *Coming of Age* narrative, describing through an ancient, somewhat mind blowing story, a moment of realisation that being truly human is to be someone who can hold rational and discerning perceptions. So, maybe it is appropriate to place it alongside our New Testament reading which, in a sense, is all about Jesus' family coming to terms with his coming of age, a time when he does things differently to them.

So, this story, alongside its poetic description of a loss of innocence also describes the sort of moment which needs to come fresh to all of us, when we start taking responsibility for our decisions. To be a human being is to be a decision maker.

Of course there is typical Jewish humour in the tale from the garden, not least when God asks Adam what has been going on. He blames Eve, then she plays passing the buck, and blames the serpent. We are meant to laugh out loud at all this.

Or how about the Jewish play on names in the myth. Adam and Eve are archetypes, that is they aren't real people but representatives of all people. The name Adam means *humankind*, and the name Eve, and we note she was only given that name at the end of the story, means *Life*. And that's such a positive name, don't you think? Traditionally Eve has been maligned because of Genesis 3 yet read the story with an open mind and we find Adam honours her at the end of this tale with the beautiful name of Eve – meaning *life giver*.

Another surprise in the story is that God is portrayed as not knowing where they were. Another laugh out loud moment? So, he comes down one evening calling out *Where are you?* We're meant to find that a somewhat playful picture of God, and it helps us not to take this story too literally, or even give it a theology it doesn't quite deserve. One Jewish commentator I read says rather helpfully that perhaps this is a phrase that God constantly asks us all at certain times in our lives, perhaps when we have big or small decisions to make *Where are you? Where are you on this issue? Where are you on the journey of faith? Where are you in the priorities you give to people or things?* It's a good and godly question isn't it: *Where are you?*

Well, in the story this is where they were. They had eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge, they were naked, and, for the first time, that seemed to trouble them.

And this is where Genesis 3, perhaps surprisingly, becomes a slightly different narrative from the one we heard in Sunday School, essentially it becomes a story of how we move from childhood to adulthood. In the first part of the story, they don't have to do too much thinking. All is provided because they can eat of any tree in the garden, except two. Yet in the second part of the myth they, as it were, have become adults because now they have discernment, they know they are naked. And they know that may not be either an appropriate or a good thing.

Being truly human is to take responsibility, to own our choices as we stand before forks in the road. God says, in the story, that now Adam and Eve have this ability to discern, what's the phrase that's used, *The man has become like one of us*. That's a surprising twist in the story. Part of being like God, is to have the ability to discern. Life's pathway is

not inevitable, we are never just victims of what is going on around us. We have choices and we can make decisions.

One of the privileges of being a local church minister is that of standing alongside folk at times of tough choices. Again and again, I have learnt so much from members of the congregations I've had the privilege to serve, of witnessing how a bereavement, tragedy, conflict or challenge hasn't crushed them because they have made a conscious choice to take another step on their personal journey, however hard that step may be. At the forks in the road, they haven't given up but have chosen to take a new path purposefully and courageously.

But how about when we chose the wrong pathway, as we often do.

Well then, a further surprise comes our way in the bible. It's the image that never strikes us as odd, but would have made its original audience gasp, of the father figure in the story Jesus told of the Lost Son. After realising he'd made so many compound bad choices he returns home and the Loving Father – which might be a much better name for the parable of the prodigal Son – comes running (something men of a certain age never did in Jewish society) running to greet him, throw his arms around him and welcome him home.

None of us will live perfect lives and all of us will make mistakes. But that, in the Judeo-Christian narrative is never the end of the story. Maybe the best of all surprises in those great gospel stories is the image of the running father, so full of love and forgiveness, who greets his returning son with outstretched arms. The bible is a wonderful book with a wonderful message of grace and new beginnings.

We must close.

Jesus, for a moment there his family get it so wrong and tried to stop him. It's a great surprise then that at the cross Mary stands faithfully beside him and after his death, his brother James becomes bishop of Jerusalem.

The Adam and Eve story, a story about making choices, which is always both a privilege and a worry.

And the surprising image of a running father – just one of many reminders in scripture that we serve of a God of grace and kindness who always wants us, whenever we fall down, to get up and in receiving forgiveness to learn the wisdom that will help us live with better decisions in the days to come.

May it be so in the name of God, the Father who runs to welcome us home, the Son who chose to live with integrity regardless of what his family thought, and Holy Spirit, whose wisdom is always there for us at every fork in the road. Amen