

## Letting the stories speak

Gen 2.15-7, 3.1-7 / Matthew 4.1-11

I recall going to the clergy study day in Guildford when the then Dean of King's College London, Richard Burridge, was talking about three ways in which people have used the text of the Bible – as a window, as a mirror, or as stained glass. The first is fairly well doomed to failure – it is almost impossible to see through the text to what actually happened. It was the fruitless attempt scholars made for most of the c.19<sup>th</sup> and c20<sup>th</sup> centuries. And it has caused immense problems for people in the process, because they were conned into believing that something was possible which simply wasn't. Lack of information, because the writers didn't give it, or biased information because the writer was a Jewish nationalist, or conflicting information which can't be reconciled mean that we are often banging heads against a brick wall.

The mirror approach is fairly obvious, but we often don't like to admit we are doing it. Richard Burridge used the lovely parallel of the way we might hear a statement from the Home Secretary on law and order. That 'text' will be read by say the Telegraph as a statement about dealing with hooligans strongly, and serve them right. It will be read by the Guardian as something raising issues of civil liberties, and the Sun will say what a nice dress the Home Secretary was wearing! In other words, we make the text say what we think it ought to say. Now immediately people will say – 'but I don't do that' – but actually it is very hard to read anything without the lens of our own experience, our own education and our own prejudices. The example we spent some time examining on that study day was how the South African Dutch Reformed Church in times past found ample justification for what they now see as the wrong idea of separate development in South Africa – Apartheid. It wasn't that they were deliberately twisting scripture – these were generally people who were deeply devout Christians who genuinely thought that is what the Biblical text taught

So if clear glass, and a mirror are a problem, maybe we have to learn to read the text as stained glass – in other words to see the story in the text, and take that at its face value. We may still be able to see something through it, to get an idea of what lies behind it. We may still see something of ourselves in it, like a mirror, but we have primarily to see the text for itself.

Now let's look at two stories we have in our readings today – part of the story of the Garden of Eden, and the story of Jesus' temptation. If we try to clear glass approach, we get into a ludicrous situation, because the Hebrew text of the story of Eden shouts at us that it is a story, not history. You only have to read any Rabbi's comment on it to see that is how it was meant to be understood. We can't look through it to some historical event because it wasn't about one. But you can see how we can read it like a mirror, to prove our particular theology about male superiority, or the existence of a demonic being like a snake, or many

other things. What we need to do is let it be the story that it is – the stained glass than makes us think about truths that are in and beyond history.

And the same applies in large measure to the temptation story. I wonder if it has crossed your mind as to how this story came to be written down. After all, the only person there was Jesus. Did he tell his friends this story? Maybe he did – but there is no other example of his reporting something at which no-one else was present. There is an interesting theory that we risk a distortion of the Biblical text every time we read it on the page, because it was intended to be *heard*, not read. The length of the Gospels is exactly what would fit on one scroll, and it would have been read all the way through, not in the little bits we tend to do in church or at home. And in the context of the whole Gospel, we see it is Matthew making a statement about who this person Jesus is, before he starts on the meaty stuff of what he said and did in his ministry and death. He is saying that this man dealt with temptation differently from the rest of us, because he didn't give in, and what follows has to spring from that picture of him.

So do you see some of the contrast we have in these two stories, if we place these two stained-glass windows next to each other? We have the story of a garden – everything lush and green, full of potential, with lots of different foods to enjoy – all except one! And that is spoiled by people wanting to have their own way. Alongside it we have the story not of a garden, but of a desert place, where nothing grows. It is a place representing what we have done to Eden. Then again you can see that one story is a story about disobedience, and what follows from that, and the other is a story about obedience, and what flows from *that*.

And at the centre of the story is a man – the name Adam literally means that. In fact although you find that name in some translations of the Bible, you won't find it in the Genesis story in the NRSV which we use in church. That version properly translates the Hebrew word 'Adam' as 'the man'. And Jesus came to be talked about by Paul and others as the new Adam, the second Adam, the new man, the new creation.

The stories are about us. That is why they resonate so powerfully for us. We have a story about the human condition, about how our greed, our self-will, our desire for independence and freedom leads to vulnerability. It is a commentary on the saying 'curiosity kills the cat'. We recognise ourselves in Adam, or Eve, or both. We have all played this game. In wanting things our way, what we actually do is to discover our own vulnerability, as the couple did in the story with their haste to join a sewing circle. We can't cope with the truth about ourselves. G.K. Chesterton was once asked to write an essay on 'What is wrong with the world'. The editor was not best pleased when it arrived – it contained just two words under the heading 'What is wrong with the world?' – 'I am'.

I guess people who have everything, and yet want more are typical of our day and age – but then that is exactly the situation of those two in the garden. Having plenty doesn't seem to make getting it right any easier – in fact it might be the opposite – Paul wrote that 'the love of money is the root of all evil.' So some devout souls have run away from the lushness of Eden, and tried to be holy in the desert. Get rid of

the world and its temptations, and we can be holy, they say. Our second story tells us that we can't run away from our human vulnerability – it is part of our nature. So even in the desert we have to face up to it. There is no escape. But the second story today tells us that the first story has been re-written. There *has* been someone who was sufficiently counter-cultural to give a new start.

We begin this week the journey with that man towards Easter, and the proof that the victory has been won. The threat in Eden was that if they disobeyed, they would die. That is the ultimate expression of human vulnerability. Easter is the story that obedience has brought life, and that we don't have to live with the consequences of Eden, but rather with the consequences of that story of the desert. Look at the stained glass of those stories, and they tell of the reality of what it is to be human, and what it is to be people who, as Paul calls it, are 'in Christ.' Let me end with a poem by Richard Jones:

God who created this Eden of earth  
Giving to Adam and Eve their fresh birth,  
What have we done with that wonderful tree?  
Lord forgive Adam, for Adam is me.

Adam ambitious desires to be wise,  
Casts out obedience, then lusts with his eyes;  
Grasps his sweet fruit, 'As God I shall be'.  
Lord forgive Adam, for Adam is me.

Thirst after pow'r is this sin of my shame  
Pride's ruthless thrust after status and fame.  
Turning and stealing and cowering from thee.  
Lord forgive Adam, for Adam is me.

Cursed is this earth through this cancerous crime,  
Symbol of man through all passage of time,  
Put it all right, Lord; let Adam be free:  
Do it for Adam, for Adam is me.

Glory to God! What is this that I see?  
Man made anew, second Adam is he,  
Bleeding his love on another fine tree;  
Dies second Adam, young Adam for me.

Rises that Adam the master of death,  
Pours out his Spirit in holy new breath;  
Sheer liberation! With him I am free!  
Lives second Adam in mercy in me.