**Lent 1A**

**Genesis 2.15-17, 3.1-7**

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.’

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God say, “You shall not eat from any tree in the garden”?’ The woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 3but God said, “You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.” ’ But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

**Romans 5.12-19**

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned— sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.

But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man’s trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man’s sin. For the judgement following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. If, because of the one man’s trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.

**Matthew 4.1-11**

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’ But he answered, ‘It is written,
“One does not live by bread alone,
   but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” ’

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,
“He will command his angels concerning you”,
   and “On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” ’
Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” ’

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! for it is written,
“Worship the Lord your God,
   and serve only him.” ’
Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

If you’ve had a chance to look at the March magazine, you will know that Jane has put it on record that she loves Lent. In the interests of balance I would like to say that I find it a hard season to love. We’re at the tail end of winter, when the weather is still cold and dismal and summer is way off. We’ve hardly had time to adjust to our new year resolutions, and here comes the church to tell us to pull our socks up and get down to some proper repenting. We take away the flowers, tone down the music and turn our thoughts to what’s wrong with us, helped along by someseriously miserable hymns. (Yes, Forty Days and Forty Nights, I’m looking at you!)

Well, those of you who were in church last week will have heard Jane’s excellent sermon, making the point that Lent is not intended as a kind of spiritual boot camp, designed to shape us up by our own efforts into titans of self-discipline who never have an unworthy thought. If we think perfection is within our own grasp, we are kidding ourselves.

In our first reading from Genesis we heard the snake telling Eve that if she eats from the forbidden tree she will become like God, knowing good and evil. Perhaps the snake had a point, sort of. One of the things that sets humans apart from animals is our conscience – our capacity to make judgements about what is good and bad. But sadly the knowledge of good and evil is not the same as the ability to act on it. We might know that we should eat healthily, be kind to one another and not get too hung up on our self-importance, but it’s another matter entirely, to live up to it. The bible tells us that humans are made in the image of God – but the snake’s words were misleading: we cannot by our own efforts make ourselves like God.

In today’s new testament reading, the apostle Paul argues forcefully that human beings cannot escape sinfulness. It is hardwired in our nature – demonstrated archetypally by Adam’s disobedience – to make mistakes, to turn away from the good things that life has to offer us in search of our own flawed solutions. But that’s OK, says Paul, because all our mistakes have been cancelled out by one man, Jesus Christ, and his gift of heavenly grace. We don’t need to win God’s favour by trying very hard to be good. We already have God’s favour. In truth we never lost it. We lost our way, and God in Jesus came to find us and show us the way back.

We see this vividly acted out in our gospel story. Jesus, if you remember, has just come from being baptised in the Jordan – where a voice from heaven has proclaimed that this man, the carpenter’s son from Nazareth, is none other than the beloved Son of God. You might expect him to start behaving in a way more befitting a divine being. But instead Jesus seems determined to identify himself, consciously and deliberately, with flawed humanity.

Like Adam and Eve expelled from the Garden of Eden, like the Israelites wandering 40 years in the wilderness, he takes himself out into the desert, the place of the outsider, the excluded and the vulnerable. By fasting, he makes himself physically weak; by going alone, he deprives himself of moral support and encouragement. And although he has just received the seal of divine approval, he doesn’t seem interested in taking on any of the trappings of divinity.

In fact, the temptations Jesus faces show exactly the opposite: God’s Son willingly taking on the restrictions of human life. He chooses to experience extreme hunger, rather than using his own power to create food. He refuses to force God’s hand for his protection, choosing trust over security. And he rejects the opportunity to grasp at the power and status which are his due, choosing instead to submit to God. Far from being random exercises to demonstrate his effortless self-command, these three temptations represent fundamental anxieties of the human condition. Worries about practical needs, security and status are as powerful today as they were to Jesus’ world. In agreeing to subject himself to human vulnerability, Jesus is demonstrating that God is not a remote and vindictive judge, just waiting for us to step out of line so he can punish us, but so acutely invested in our lives that he brings himself to experience them at the deepest level. This is not Jesus showing off his spiritual muscle: this is Jesus showing us how much God cares for us.

If that’s so, why do we bother with Lent at all? If we are assured of God’s forgiveness, shouldn’t we just enjoy the time we have and leave it to him to sort out the mess? The story of the bible – and especially of the coming of Jesus into the world – is the story of God’s longing to restore his relationship with people. But relationships, as we all know, have two sides. God is offering us the hand of friendship, but each of us has to decide whether or not to take it. How would we do that? Perhaps one message we can hear in today’s gospel story is the value of taking time out from our pressurised lives to pause and take stock.

Going out into the wilderness allowed Jesus to get away from the demands of everyday life, to a place where he could discover a new clarity of vision. We aren’t told how he spent his forty days, but by the end of it, he had a clear sense of his relationship with God. His answers to the devil underline that: God is his source of nourishment, security and purpose. This is the knowledge that goes on to underpin his whole ministry, and gives him strength to carry his task to its brutal conclusion.

If Jesus, the Son of God, needed to take time to understand his reliance on God, then surely that is true for us too. So one way of observing Lent might be to look for some corners of undistracted time to think about those same questions. What does God mean to me? Is he a shadow, a half-forgotten fairy story? Is he a stern taskmaster, who demands that I try again, year after year, to better myself by my own efforts? Is he the generous giver of the “abundance of grace”, who knows that I fail to live up even to my own standards, and yet still welcomes me with open arms? If he is, do I want to be welcomed? This isn’t a test, by the way, with right and wrong answers: we each have to come to our own understanding of God. The church can offer guidance, wisdom distilled through the centuries, which points us towards the third of those options; but God’s compassion welcomes each of us as the unique individual that we are, doubts and fears and all. If we can begin to grasp that, we will perhaps be liberated from some of the bad habits that diminish us, whether that’s self-medicating with alcohol after a bad day at work, or taking out our frustrations on our nearest and dearest.

Maybe, like Jane, you love Lent. Maybe you’re inspired by self-discipline and the opportunity to gain control over your impulses, clear out the mental clutter and toughen up your resolve. If so, I salute you! For what it’s worth, I will be trying – again – to conquer my peanut butter habit this year. But in our efforts to do better, let us never lose sight of the God who loves us in spite of our failings, and who freely offers us the gift of eternal life.

 Ruth Carter