

Sermon 9 March 2014 'Choice to live by'
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 Mt 4:1-11

Prayer: God of our faith journey, you meet us in life even when it is a desolate, wilderness place, where we are stretched and tested. Remind us that you walk with us and hold us on your pathway. Grant to us the wisdom and flexibility needed so we increase our understanding and grow in grace and love for you, our neighbour and our-self. Amen.

Choices – choices to live by is the offering for us this morning – and we are reflecting on that from the story narratives we have from Genesis and of Jesus temptation in the wilderness. They both have something to teach us about the power of choice and the consequences of choice within the Christian faith. We begin our Lenten walk looking at what our faith ancestors describe as the 'first' choice humanity made, and we look at Jesus choice when offered all that humanity could desire.

Chronologically we begin with the Genesis narrative of Adam and Eve in the Garden – and I thought I would share an insight I was given / reminded of this week. In the narrative of our faith beginnings I have tended to think of Eden as 'The Garden'... But H Wallace challenged me with the reflection that it's actually God's garden – and was created for God, not for human occupation. This 'paradise' is a place for **God** to live, not humans!

H Wallace says this garden is a place of "abundant fertility, with supernatural trees of great beauty offering divine gifts (wisdom and life; 2:9). There is a subterranean source of life-giving water which feeds the whole earth (2:6, 10-14). It is the place where the Lord resides and takes rest (3:8) and where, in the presence of other divine creatures (the cherubim and flaming sword in 3:24, and the 'us' referred to in 3:22), the Lord makes decrees affecting the destiny of the world (3:16-19). The Garden of Eden is not intended to be a human 'paradise', but is actually the garden of God into which humans are placed by the one who is its chief resident (cf. Ezek 28:1-19)."

Humanity was creatively invited into God's garden because God wanted / desired company and called humans into being. We belong with God, first and in God's garden second. We belong in relationship with God and this biblical narrative invites us to come to terms with how we *did* our / **do** our best to control and even break **that relationship**. Personally I don't identify with church language of 'fall' or blame, but I do recognise an enduring human characteristic of wanting to be 'like God', to possess or 'be God' and I can understand this narrative to be still speaking into my life, my world today. cV

Having called us into being with the freedom to 'be' – the risk was that we would 'be' – we did and we are! We have the knowledge of good and evil and with exceptions, we have the capacity to choose. The narrative states it is this ability to know we have a choice that forces* alienation of and from God and humanity; Human from human and humanity from the ground / earth of creation. *Wallace continues with: "The intimacy that was the hallmark of the garden, has been broken. While in the telling of the story there is an element of the beginning of sin, it is more about the constant human propensity to abuse the intimate, open but vulnerable relationships established by God in creation.

The true freedom of humans in the Eden story lies **not** in unbound freedom to choose at will from all that is available or possible in creation. Rather, it is to be found as one enters the fragile, intimate relationships of God's creation with due respect for all life and creation. It is to live within the limits of that intimacy; limits which have been set by God."

So ~~thus~~, the story of Eden is well suited to be connected with Matthew's account of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness (Matt 4:1-11). There the question is not about Jesus' moral actions, but **about who he is as a faithful servant before God**.

Of course, the story of Eden is not without its twists and turns, and in a subtle way the writers want to say to us that this kind of faithful living in the presence of God is not an easy thing. Many questions remain." And they always will but....

Can we live in and with that intimacy of relationship the Genesis narrative describes – **what do we chose?** Walter Brueggemann (*The Theology of the Old Testament, p. 490*) put it this way when he writes of how the choices made by the first two human beings, Adam and Eve are a rejection of the partnership offered by God – on God's terms, with humanity and God. *SacraconversaZione*: He states that the choices made do not deny any subsequent humanity the character of the image of God." (p.452)

As he points out, subsequent references in the Genesis narrative (5:1 and 9:16) to the image of God **and** the promise of covenant with all humankind (9:8-17) to put into play three powerful beliefs in the Genesis narrative: 1. Sin is a rejection of God's offer of partnership with humankind that is meant to enhance all creation; 2. Human rejection is genuinely frightening for its dire consequences; but, 3. God **will not allow** this rupture to overwhelm humankind and the rest of creation." . *SacraconversaZione*

Evil, personified as Satan makes an appearance right at the very beginning of Mark's gospel (1:12-13) and just after the baptism of Jesus in Luke (4:1-13) and today's appointed text from Matthew to tempt Jesus to betray his mission on behalf of the Father. This confrontation concludes only when Jesus quotes the Torah (Deuteronomy 6:16) and makes absolutely clear the purpose of all he will say and do, is to "worship the Lord God and serve only God." *SacraconversaZione* Jesus **will not betray** God or his mission from God; – he will be faithful to who he is and he will serve the Lord God, his Father, Creator.... Cv

Last week we look at Jesus mountain top experience where he was, before witnesses **claimed** and **acknowledged** by God, his father. He led his disciples down the mountain – spiritually as well as literally! And the next thing he has is a test – of body, mind and spirit – what does he choose? Highs and lows – that's what faith and life are about, ironic perhaps but as we walk life's journey how do **we know** what to choose that is good, what is life enhancing and will not betray our God? Cv

Jesus was offered a choice, *admittedly in an abbreviated form*, all that humanity could possibly desire. He was offered – power, money and worship – what more could you want?? These three speak into some of our deepest human needs – eg: to never again be hungry; to never again be afraid of 'death'; to be the centre of attention and be 'first'

These three go to the very core of what it is to be human, and Jesus faced them, alone after 40 days of fasting! In this weakened and deprived state – what will Jesus choose? The easy way out? The comfort of knowledge of an end to the 'low' of this suffering? Will Jesus accept the 'privileges' use the 'perks' of office' of being God's Son or will he remain true to his mission and God's ask? *Will he be faithful to who he is and what God was calling him to, so entering fully our human condition of want and need and pain? The temptations attack him at the core of what it is to be human. (*R Swanson(*Provoking the Gospel of Matthew*).

Jesus knows what it is to be fully human and he knows the choices we face. What did He choose without invoking his Divine 'rights'? To be faithful to **who** and **whose** he was and to reject any alternative to doing it God's way, no matter how much 'easier' it might have made his life in what was a real low point. When we face temptation, and we do and **always will**, when we are in a miserable place or just leaving a fantastic point, today Jesus's story tells us to 1. Remember **who and whose** we are, to reject any alternative to God's ways –and above all to protect ourselves with Scripture – sing a hymn, say the Lord's prayer, say out loud any verses you know, pray... it worked for Jesus, it will work for us. Cv

This is the first Sunday of our Lenten journey for 2014 and we have been called to confront our humanity at one of its lowest points. But temptation is real, sin is a fact and its consequences can be deadly. It begins with the breakdown of the partnership offered us by God for the good of all creation because we wanted to 'know' more. We do know more – and it is a faith step to know enough to admit the extent of our knowledge before our God, who will never allow our actions to sever the relationship **nor ever abandon** us. We know this because of Jesus and that through his life and death he brought us home, his mission accomplished and our partnership re-established with the God of our creation. But knowing is one thing – choosing what we live by is another. *SacraconversaZione*: Amen