

Back to Basics

As we enter the period of Lent it is appropriate that we remind ourselves, of why the momentous events which are going to unfold before us, were necessary.

So we go back to the basics, God created the world and God created man in His likeness. And the Bible says "Then God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was very good! And evening passed and morning came, marking the sixth day." (Genesis 1:31 NLT)

It was very good, can you imagine that? We sometimes sing, 'I can only imagine, what it will be like when I walk by your side' and of course that's true, we can only imagine what it will be like. But can you imagine what it must have been like to walk in the garden with God. Can you imagine being in a place and time where there was no pollution, no hate, no violence, no greed, no selfishness, no offence, no suffering, no pain, no misery, no worry, no bills to pay, no needs, no hunger, no thirst, no need to worry about what to wear, and more important possibly than any of these things, and because of their absence, no condemnation.

But, of course, we know the story man sinned, and lost it all, and pain and suffering came into the world, and hunger and thirst came into the world, and greed and misery and hate and offence and worry and condemnation.

Paul writes 'When Adam sinned, sin entered the world' (Romans 5:12), and Paul goes on to tell us the result of that, 'Adam's sin brought death' (Romans 5:12). I'm sure there will have been many people down the years who have attempted to minimise Adam's sin. After all in the context of life, in the context of art, it's such a small things, a piece of fruit from a particular tree, wow. But anyone who does that, anyone who attempts to minimise the sin, does not understand, or want to understand what sin is. Adam's sin had nothing to do with a piece of fruit; it had everything to do with trust and obedience.

God trusted Adam with His creation, God trusted Adam, in a sense, with everything He had made, He let man into His house, gave man the key and said look after it, and O by the way, there's only one thing I am asking you not to do, don't touch that tree. Just think of the context and the proportion. Within a boundless universe, in a beautiful world, freshly made, sparkling in the sunlight, one tree was out of bounds. And man and whether it was Adam or Eve who first sinned the result is the same, man, generic, created, loved and entrusted, proved he could not be trusted, he repaid trust with betrayal and love with disdain.

And because all sin has consequences, that sin, that first, almost insignificant sin, had the consequences which Paul tells us about, 'so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned. Yes, people sinned even before the law was given. But it was not counted as sin because there was not yet any law to break. Still, everyone died—from the time of Adam to the time of Moses—even those who did not disobey an explicit commandment of God, as Adam did.'(Romans 5:12-14)

And I can almost sense the feeling of 'it's not fair Lord' why should we all suffer for the sin of Adam? And the only answer is the fact that a righteous God can not abide sin, that God and sin can not inhabit the same place, so that it was necessary for God to distance Himself from man, until such time as the price for that sin could be fully paid.

God didn't build up the wall of separation between Himself and man, God didn't dig a gulf between Himself and man, man did. And I think it is important that we realise and recognise what constituted sin. Man's sin was nothing more or less than a betrayal of the trust which God had placed in him.

And that betrayal carries on today, in all of our lives. I am going to ask you this morning to examine yourselves, examine your thought this past week, examine your actions this past week, how many of those thoughts and actions have been a betrayal of God's trust in us.

Sin has nothing to do with the law, and everything to do with trust. Let's look again at what Paul wrote, 'Yes, people sinned even before the law was given.'(Romans 5:13) Sin is an attitude, a state of mind that says, I am more important than anyone else, and that includes God. An attitude which has become embedded in the very fabric of our nature to the point that we do not even recognise it is there.

Sin is ignoring not just the needs, but the legitimate aspirations of others, in preference to our wants. Sin is betraying the thoughts and expectations of others in deference to our wants. And if we really examine ourselves if we really allow God to come in and look in our hearts this morning, I am sure we will see things in us that need to change drastically, dramatically, before we are able to claim to be followers of Jesus

This morning we've read the passage in Matthews's gospel about the temptation of Jesus. Something which strikes me every time I read this passage is the apparent insignificance of the temptations. If you think about it, none of the temptations would actually contravene the letter of any of the commandment. And this apparent insignificance, and insidiousness, goes to show that the serpent, Satan, has not lost any of his cunning.

The first temptation is such a human one, such a natural one, it goes to one of our basic needs, food. I am sure many of you who have at one time or other fasted can identify with the need. It is fair to say that the practice of fasting goes beyond the physical to the psychological. It isn't just the body which craves food; it is the mind which craves for food. I remember that for many years I never felt hunger, I could go a whole day without food, and if Sheila didn't put some in front of me, I would not notice. I almost never had lunch, and would quite happily skip breakfast and any other meal. But, the day I chose to fast, I was hungry from the moment I woke up to the moment I went to bed. The mind always wants what it can not have.

And here is Jesus, the Bible says 'For forty days and forty nights he fasted and became very hungry.'(Matthew 4:2) Let's not forget that Jesus was fully human, so yes I can see how, after forty days he would be hungry, and what Satan is really saying is, go on, treat yourself, no one's going to know, you've got the power why not use it. I don't want a show of hands, but I am sure that everyone here who has ever fasted, has had that thought come into their mind at some time or other, go on, have a nibble of something, no one's going to know, and of course no one will, except you and God. And at the root of the thought, at the root of the temptation, is a betrayal, a going back on a proposed course of action, because anyone who is fasting is doing so as a sacrifice to God, and any cheating is nothing less than a betrayal of that sacrifice. And Jesus turns to scripture and puts Satan in his place, and notice that even as He answers, He highlights His humanity. 'People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God' (Matthew 4:4), people, or as other translations put it man.

And as we look at our lives this temptation takes on so many forms, except in the fasting context food is rarely the temptation. But there are so many temptations to feed our eyes, with the wrong kind of images. There are so many temptations to feed our ears by listening to gossip and slander. There are so many temptations to feed our minds with impure thoughts and the wrong kind of thinking. And because Satan, the serpent, is so shrewd, we often don't notice, until we are hooked, and if anyone has seen a fish trying to wriggle out of a hook, you'll know how difficult that is, and Satan's hooks have more barbs than any hook which man can invent. And our only defence is testing everything by the word of God.

And so Satan tried another tack, well ok, if you really want to be hungry, be hungry, but here, let me give you a chance to prove yourself, I mean what do you have to lose, if you really are who you say you are, well the angels will protect you, and then you'll really know and have the confidence to go through with it, and if you're not well, at least you won't make a fool of yourself, you'll be dead. It's a temptation which strikes at the heart of the insecurity which is inside each one of us.

At different times of our lives we all go through what John of the Cross called, the dark night of the soul. Those moments of anguish and doubt, when things don't make sense, when life itself seems pointless, when we begin to doubt that there even is a God, let alone that He loves us, and Satan will creep up to us and say, come on throw yourself off the parapet, if there is a God, He'll send His angels, and if there isn't well at least you won't carry on deluding yourself. And the temptation comes in so many different kinds of wrappings; we can see so many people throwing themselves off the parapet. Some will throw themselves into drugs, into tobacco, into alcohol, into the occult. And again our only defence is testing everything against the word of God, but we will only even want to do this if we have an assurance of salvation to begin with.

Which is why John Wesley thought this was so important. And for those of you who may not know, or may have forgotten, let me remind you of John Wesley's basic points. The first one is the one which Paul highlighted; all men have sinned and need salvation. No argument there. Paul wrote 'all "For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard." (Romans 3:23 NLT)

The second one is all men can be saved, again the Bible speaks to this, "For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16 NLT).

The third of Wesley's points was that 'all men can know they are saved,' because Wesley knew that, as we try and live a life for God, there will be many times when that assurance will be the only thing that sustains us, and keeps us coming back to the source of our salvation. Again we turn to Paul who wrote, "For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God's children." (Ro 8:16 NLT), we can know we are saved, because His Spirit tells us, and once we know that we don't need to prove anything, to ourselves or to Satan. That's not to say we can just live life as we want, it is to say we have no need, or right to be insecure in our relationship with God.

The fourth of Wesley's points was that all men can be saved to the uttermost, his doctrine of Christian perfection, which we are not going to go into here.

And so we come to the third temptation, ok so you want to be hungry, suit yourself and you're sure of yourself, fantastic. But if that is the case, why are you wasting your time following this God who only wants you to serve Him, I mean how close minded can you get. There are so many better ways of doing things. Just think how much more good you could do with your gifts and talents if you used them to help people. How much better you could do if you just went with the flow, got accepted by the world and was able to work in it. There's no limit to what you can accomplish, all for the good of course, but on your terms.

Such a reasonable thought, after all everything goes so slowly, I want to see people save today, I want to see the church full today, and maybe all it will take is a bit of tweaking here and there. Maybe if we just stopped saying that Jesus is The way and The truth and The life, and went with Him being a way, we wouldn't put some people off. Maybe if we didn't stand on our moral principals and didn't frown on smoking and alcohol abuse and taking drugs. After all if we agreed that people could separate and divorce and live as they wanted to, we would get more people in church. Let's face it, if we trusted in man and money, we would probably be more successful, if we run a church club, we'd get more members. If we concentrated on the physical, more group activities, forget prayer and house groups and meeting on Sunday. Let's just have club meeting during the week when we watch films, play games, O and eat of course, and then Sundays we can stay in bed and relax, after all it's

meant to be a day of rest isn't it? And Jesus said "For the Scriptures say, 'You must worship the LORD your God and serve only him.'"(Matthew 4:10)

Sin is a constant in our lives, it has crept into our nature and is now part of our makeup, and it is insidious in the way it will creep into our very thoughts and our very being. And we need to be constantly on the lookout, because temptations will come in all shapes and sizes, and in all manner of disguises. And these temptations creep into our minds, every day of our lives, because we have needs and desires and those needs and desires supersede the rights and needs and desires of others. If we need something, and we can take it, and no one will know, and it won't even hurt the person we are taking it from, because they will never know, and let's face it, it won't affect them, they've got so much already. It's a temptation which goes to the root of piracy, in any of its forms or manifestation, and I can almost hear people think, what is he on about? Why is he talking about pirates? Because pirates, take what does not belong to them, because piracy today is found in software, in videos, in music, in anything that we take and use, which does not belong to us because we have not paid for. And because sin is sin, every time any of us do this, and I include myself in this, we are stealing and have a place on that cross. We are in a sense, turning stones into bread, because we want the bread, and have the power to do so.

And every time we fall the enemy can and does use it to remind us that we don't deserve God's love, that maybe we should test it somehow. And of course we don't, we can never deserve it, but we always need to keep ourselves aware that we have it, it is a gift of God's grace, and one we need to keep constantly reminding ourselves of. But a gift that does not in any sense give us the liberty, or the freedom to do what we want, to assume power and authority over our lives which are not ours to assume. Jesus has paid the ransom for our lives and they belong to Him.

Jesus could see through the tricks of Satan, often we don't, and we fall into every trap he sets. The only way we can see through Satan's tricks and lies is by allowing the Spirit of God to guide our lives and our actions, as Jesus did. By making a deliberate and concerted effort to refute Satan and all his works. By making a deliberate and concerted effort to live lives worthy of our calling. By reminding ourselves constantly that it is this sin that is in us, this sin that constantly trips us up, this sin which so insidiously works its way into our lives, which took Jesus took that cross and drove those nails into his hands.

I hope and pray that today, that knowledge and that reminder drive us to new efforts to avoid sin and to live for Him.