

10th September 2023 – Good News #2 ‘A world spoiled’ (Genesis 3:1-19)

When our kids were very little, I remember getting home from work one day and Alise and I caught up on the day's events. She told me about a small incident that had happened: one of our kids was always fascinated by our video recorder – remember them? – and once they started to toddle just before they turned 1, they kept fiddling with it. Like most videos we kept it under the telly, so it was a double risk – apart from the damage they could do to the video, they would often pull themselves up on the TV stand to get access to the video – so Alise told them not to do it.

This particular day, our child had shown a growing interest in getting their hands on the tempting video recorder again, and Alise had warned them. She then nipped out to get some more juice for them (or something like that) but loitered by the door to see what happened when she was out of the room. Our child looked around to check no-one was watching, and, thinking the coast was clear, toddled over to the video....

I won't say which of our children that was – but to be honest it could have been any child. All of us who've been parents will recognise that behaviour – indeed, we recognise it because we know it's true for us, too. Give human beings a boundary, tell anyone that there's *one* thing they can't do, and they'll immediately want to do it, to cross that line, to break that rule. In religious language, that determination to rebel is what we call 'sin', and it's there in all of us. No parent intentionally teaches their child to do it: no-one sits down with their child one day and says: 'right son/daughter, today you're going to start learning how to sin. We'll start today with lying, it'll be stealing tomorrow and we'll take it from there.' Two words you never have to teach a child are 'no' and 'mine'. It's just there, in them – in us.

And this inbuilt determination to resent boundaries, to rebel, to be selfish, is there right from the beginning. The loving Creator God we met last week wanted to enjoy deep relationship with his creation, so he made us – but anyone who knows about love knows that love can only exist if we choose it. God doesn't want a robot who has no choice to love or obey, so he gives human beings free will, i.e. freedom to enjoy the good world he made: the freedom he has himself – another part of what it means to be made in God's image. So, he sets them in paradise and gives them complete freedom to enjoy it, with only one rule. They can do anything they want, except there is one tree they must not eat from – the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Just *one* boundary, just one prohibition – and we all know what happens. Doesn't matter how good or happy or privileged our lives are, give us one thing we can't have...

Genesis chapter 3 is one of the hardest hitting in the bible – again, as we observed last week we get too hung up on whether Adam and Eve really were the first humans; that is not the point of the story: the writer is teaching us profound and fundamental things about God, about us and about our world. **Adam and Eve are, in a sense, all of us – they are, if you like, representative humans.** And these humans encounter temptation. The snake is the voice in our ear, leading us astray. We could interpret it as our own desires, as the influence of others around us, or as the personification of evil – or even all three – but let's notice how the snake works.

The first ploy is doubt: 'Did God really say...?' Our temptation to do wrong starts with undermining our confidence that God is good, that how God wants us to live is really fair or right. Isn't God a spoilsport for saying that this thing is wrong or unhealthy? Did God really say...?

And Eve's response shows the first crack in the wall: yes, she affirms that God did say, but she adds 'and you must not touch it.' God only said don't eat, not don't touch. So, **after doubt comes distortion**. We exaggerate God's commands to make them seem burdensome, excessive....

But they haven't cracked yet, so **the snake plays his next card: deceit**: 'You won't die,' he says, 'because you'll be like God.' In other words, God is really stopping you because he's insecure, he doesn't want a rival. This is the nub of why sin is so deadly – it lies to us. It promises things it can't deliver. It promises freedom and gives us captivity; it promises control, but actually takes it away from us; it promises us life, but gives us death.

The final 'd' is desire: having wavered in doubt, distortion and deceit, what finally tips human beings over the edge is that the fruit looked good. Isn't that so like the appeal of the sort of fake, plastic lives that are constantly promoted to us via the media or advertising? We used to have a friend in London who was a food photographer – you know the sort of image you get on the cover of Good Food magazine? And yes, you can actually have a full-time job photographing plates of food! One day she let us into the tricks of her trade, all the things she has to do to make the food look perfect – and she admitted that the food tastes horrible, it's covered in lacquer and usually stone cold. It looks perfect, but it would make you ill if you ate it.

And that is exactly what happens to Adam and Eve – both equally culpable by the way, in fact Adam even more so as he doesn't even question, he just goes along with it. They taste the food, but the consequences are horrible. 'Their eyes were opened, and they realised that they were naked.' **So much for being like God – suddenly they are embarrassed, and they start to hide**. They hide their bodies from each other, and then they hide from God as he comes for a gentle evening stroll to see his best friends: 'Where are you?'

That simple question is, if you like, the summary of God's relationship to humanity ever since. God takes the initiative, he comes looking and we hide. But God wants to find us, like the good shepherd he goes looking: 'Where are you?'

And so, sin enters the world – and all the consequences that come with it. **Our relationship with creation is spoiled**: we treat other animal species as enemies and childbirth becomes dangerous. **Our relationship with each other is spoiled**: the battle of the sexes begins: 'Your desire will be for your husband; and he will rule over you.' The word for 'desire' here has the meaning of manipulation or control – so what it means is: 'you will try and control your husband and he will try and control you.' Instead of mutuality and delight there will be battles for control.

And our relationship with ourselves and our purpose is spoiled – instead of rejoicing in the good world and looking after it as stewards, work now becomes toil, hard graft, and the grave becomes our final destination. The word Adam means dust – dust which God breathed into, as we saw last week. Now God reminds the man: your name is dust, and you will return to it.

It is a sobering picture, and the first thing we have to acknowledge is how true it is. One of the reasons I am a Christian is that I think the bible's picture of human nature is devastatingly accurate. We are magnificent ruins: made with great gifts and capable of great good, but also innately selfish and naturally rebellious – magnificent ruins. Every time we see our toddler check that we're not looking before doing something they shouldn't, we see Genesis chapter 3 played out before our eyes.

Every time we see relationships go astray, as we hide from each other and God, we see Genesis 3 played out before our eyes. Every time I look into my own soul, I see Genesis chapter 3 played out before my eyes.

The big lie of our current culture is that people are innately good and corrupted by religion. No, they're not, they don't need religion to corrupt them. The reason religions have done some bad things is that they're full of people – it's people that are corrupt, and it's why human-created religion will always fail. If it's just rituals and compliance, it doesn't make people good. It doesn't fix what's in our hearts.

No, we need a rescuer – which is our good news next week. But let's notice as we close that there are signs of hope even in this chapter. Yes, we have to own this story, it's hard but life-giving medicine that we all need to swallow. But let's rejoice first that **God comes looking for us**. He doesn't quit, he comes to find us. Let's rejoice second that **he doesn't curse us**. The snake is cursed, but we never are. God still loves his special work – for all that we might spoil it, we are still his best work.

Finally, God promises that one day the offspring of the woman will crush the serpent's head.

One day someone will come along who can withstand temptation, who can defeat the snake on his own terms. He will pay a price for that – his heel will be bruised – but he will crush our great enemy. You could say that the story of the rest of the bible is 'the search for the serpent crusher'. And praise God, we know who that is! We'll let the story unfold over the next few weeks – but today, let's give thanks that Genesis 3 is not the end of the story, only the beginning. There is hope, there is a Saviour, and the Good Shepherd still comes looking for us, each of us, in the cool of the day. Amen.