

Freedom from Boundaries?

Genesis 2-3

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

All Saints Kings Heath, first Sunday of Lent 2023

How brief was the time in Eden: just eighteen Bible verses. The tantalisingly short time of perfection, simplicity and complete absence of shame dramatizes our longing for innocence, and our deep yearning for something, some way of being without anxiety; our hunch that holiness is just out of reach. Some think of the Genesis creation stories as describing how things were a long time ago. I prefer to think of them as poems or dramas which help us understand how things are. They are origin stories not in the sense of history, but in the sense of establishing some fundamentals about our existence.

In his majestic work *His Dark Materials*, Philip Pullman draws us into a universe recognisably like this one, but where he can play interestingly with familiar realities. There every human has a daemon, a talkative animal character inseparable from them, acting as a kind of conscience, always the opposite gender to the person (a bit binary, I know). It's a terrific literary device because it allows us to hear everyone's inner dialogue. It would be clunky in most hands, but Pullman is brilliant and uses the choice of animal for each character to say something about them. Someone has a plucky little cuddly looking furry creature. Someone else a lizard or a serpent (watch out for them), someone a swift bird. Animals are so evocative. Anthropomorphism isn't all bad and isn't a Disney invention. With these engaging double characters, Pullman can reveal the inner struggles people have with their decisions. He can display their longings.

The poets who gave us Genesis do something very similar. The drama of Eden, the stylised characters of the man and woman made from the earth they till, representing all of us, the talking serpent: all this is very swiftly allows us to hear humanity's inner dialogue, and feel at the opening of the scriptures, the tantalizing experience of being human. God gives us all we need to flourish: provision of abundant creation, a vocation - a sense of calling ("keep the earth and till it"), a purpose beyond ourselves, and companionship along the way¹. He gives us one simple manageable boundary, that one tree, just one, of which we may not eat. The modest restraint required is an emblem of the discipline required to exist in company. The moment there is more than one of us, compromise is part of life and the notion of freedom is qualified. That it be a tree of knowledge is also a deft device. Another Bible poet described our condition like this: God has put eternity in human minds, but not so that it can be grasped. (Ecclesiastes 3).

The talking serpent and the couple - Everyman and Everywoman - display for us our inner dialogue and longings: our constant worry that we're missing out on something bigger or better; our desire for something called freedom; our curiosity that makes us always try to find out more. These are at once attractive and fraught human characteristics. They make us amazing and yet often get us into terrible trouble. Very swiftly, the poets of Genesis help us feel all these turbulent, immeasurable, existential currents and marshal them into a story with a sequence, a narrative we can hold in our heads. The purpose of the story, crafted as an origin myth, placed at the entrance to the library of scriptures, is to set our relationship with God at the heart of our search for meaning. It prepares us to read the great saga of humanity's separation from and reconciliation with our creator.

I said they were succinct. They did all that with fewer words than I've used trying to explain what's going on in those eighteen verses.

On Friday I walked through a small wood, turning over in my mind, no, in my heart, the astonishing chapter in Robert MacFarlane's "Underland," in which he explores what lies beneath our feet. It's a chapter about fungi, and describes how rhizomes form networks often miles across, through which trees communicate with each other, warning of the arrival of this or that illness, allowing trees on the far side of the wood to make chemical preparation to fend off the sickness. Fungi are among the most dazzling

¹ The intervening verses of Genesis 2 omitted today are about the creation of Eve, since "it is not good for the human to be alone"

creatures, apparently mindless, but transmitting information like no other. I am, of course, amazed by the facts about fungi, but as I emerged from the wood, it was the fact humans had discovered what fungi were up to that made me laugh with wonder. What magnificent curiosity, what patience to analyse the data, what extravagant, worshipful fascination the funghi enthusiast scientists display in their life long love of mushrooms. What wonder, too, in MacFarlane's brilliance with language, and what a miracle it is for another human to decode the shapes on a page that convey his thoughts and enjoy the informative poetry of it, synapses bursting like fireworks in the brain. I chuckled and shook my head in happy wonder.

A few breezy hillocks further on I stopped in the middle of a newly tilled field. I guessed it was 11 o'clock. A minute's silence for Ukraine. After a few moments' helpless reflection I sang the Ukrainian Kyrie and pressed on, now thinking how I could not walk through a Ukrainian field as carelessly as this because of what lies beneath the soil we are meant to till and keep. The deeply depressing return of landmines to European soil was in the news this week. They are ingenious. If the enemy is coming, place the explosives with their clever hair trigger just beneath the surface and they won't know till it's too late. Brilliantly invented, skilfully, efficiently manufactured, tax paid respectably on the sale, cleverly laid in the soil that we are called to till and to keep, the soil with its hidden secrets of microbes nutrients and fungi. The soil from which Adam is made. How tragic, how bleak this application of human curiosity, human reach, human anxiety about missing out. How dangerous tilling and keeping the earth will be in that region for years to come.

God, we must be frank, it is very hard for us to untangle our good curiosity from our dangerous over-reaching. They seem to come from the same place. It's very hard for us to separate the astonishing reaching upwards and resilient hopefulness that has allowed Ukraine to repulse the evil invasion from the over-reaching and fear of missing out that is acted out in the invasion. "We'll be secure if we have just a bit more land...their happiness is our loss....their friendships threaten our loneliness so we must deprive them of relationship...."

As we remember Adam and Eve tasting that fruit we are invited to ask what we are anxious about missing out on. We don't have to look far around the world to see the conflict caused by fear of missing out.

We don't have to look far around the world and find examples of human ingenuity and curiosity leading to great life-giving discovery, but also to disaster and or harm.

We don't have to look far around the world to find examples of where freedom is over stated, idolised to the point of destructiveness or where something is presented as a solution when it might be a bigger problem than the one we're trying to solve. The myth that we are free is exposed beautifully in Genesis, as one simple modest boundary was set for Adam and Eve. There's just one fruit our human bodies won't be able to cope with. This is a symbol of what it means to be alive at all: the moment there is more than of us there must be compromise. There will need to be boundaries of various kinds – traced in the law Paul talks about, for example. The moment there is more than one of us, we have to adjust our expectations of the world. Without companionship we would be desperate. With companionship, there is compromise and boundary. The irony of Adam and Eve crossing the one boundary God gave was that it was freedom they were after. Only after they've crossed it, do they discover, it was the boundary that set them free to enjoy God and each other without shame.

If God were to come and fix everything we have done, we should lose our freedom. Ironically, it was freedom Adam and Eve sought by reaching for the fruit. In doing so they lost the freedom of innocence. No, instead, God chose to come and be with us in our freedom with all its temptation and difficulty in finding the right balance in life.

Paul takes the poetry of Genesis and distils it further, the repeated rhythm of one man's sin...one man's grace...one man's death...one man's life... This is not a formula to say it was literally all Adam's fault and Jesus pays enough or neutralises like some chemical reaction. Rather it is to say yes, Adam and Eve - all of us - are in that confused condition, so nearly good, so brilliantly, so disastrously curious; it seems nothing can resolve it. It's too much. The whole world is screwed up. But Jesus *is enough* to prove God is with us and does not want to be without us. He comes in Christ to be in our space, so we cannot claim to be lost or abandoned. We cannot claim we have no vocation. If we say we're not worthy of his God's

company, he says "hard luck. I'm here anyway. I *declare* you worthy of my company." (Justification is the word Paul used.)² If we say it's easy for him, being the Son of God and all, he lets us eavesdrop on the intimate experience of his temptation to reassure that our inner struggle, our inner dialogue is understood in the heart of God. (Matthew 4:1-11)

Our curiosity is not fundamentally wrong. What Genesis and Jesus offer us is a realism about that curiosity and way of living with it well. Be curious, explore, but not in an effort to escape God for a fake notion of freedom. For "freedom" from God is anxiety about nothingness; over-reaching for freedom, we discover god has been replaced by fear of missing out. But coming among us in tempted Jesus, God says, "be curious and reach forwards knowing *I am with you*. If you seek greater knowledge, know I am with you as you do. Ask what is your vocation with that knowledge? If you face this crisis, know I am with you. What is your vocation in this crisis? If you face illness and fear missing out on the life you thought you were going to have, say, God is with me, now what is my vocation in this illness?"

This is why we deliberately exaggerate some boundaries in Lent, asking particular discipline of ourselves, compromising our desires and impulses. It's to re-set our pattern of questioning. It may seem trivial Oh, just one more glass; just one more bite..." but the discipline is to train and check our curiosity. This is to turn hunger – for food or for knowledge - into prayer that all our exploration and discovery and appetite be consciously in relationship with God. It is to find the nuanced freedom of being alive, with agency in this world, knowing our vocation and in loving relationship with creation and those we share it with. Accepting wise and loving boundaries we are free to relish the boundless scope of the curious human mind and feel our passionate hearts beating in syncopated time with the loving heart of God.

² If you struggle with this Paul passage rhetorically, don't worry. Feel the rhythm of one, two, one, two, contrasting. It's to reassure us Jesus has done enough for us to be all right with God. If it's still too dizzying a passage simply take the phrase from today's collect which sums it all up: ..."as you know our weakness [Adam] may we know your power to save [Christ]"