

Queen's Lent Bible Notes

Week 1: 26th Feb-4th March 2023

All the relevant Scriptural passages are available here in full:

<https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=24>

Gen 2:15-16: 3:1-7

Ignorance. Knowledge. Self-awareness. Control. This passage plays out a bit like a soap opera. The function and trajectory of the main characters is set – they are charged with looking after the garden and given instructions about the opportunities and limits of their role. Then, the crafty one is introduced, offering a combination of truth and lies. The garden keepers can't tell the difference between the two and become convinced that God is acting out of self-interest and self-protection. So, their actions are concerned with taking care of themselves. Humanity's crime is not trusting that God would care for them. Their mistake was not believing that the earth had been gifted to them to as a source of life – not 'on a plate' (so to speak), but as a collaborative partner. Think about the contrast. People are charged with the 'tilling' and 'keeping' of Eden – it's clearly a give and take exercise. As any farmer will tell you, the ground has to be both invested in and taken from in order to flourish. The problem occurs when humanity just take for their own self-benefit and forget their giving responsibilities. What can I get from the ground that will improve my quality of life and promote me over it? How ironic then, that when they realise that they can provide nothing themselves to cover their nakedness, they are forced to draw from the earth, having broken their agreement to live in harmony with it.

- How good are we at distinguishing truth and lies, particularly when they are intertwined? How can we improve at this?
- Do you understand a connection between your relationship with God and with the earth? How do you explain it?
- What *good* things do the characters strive for in this passage but just go about the wrong way? What can we learn from this?

Psalm 32

Since the dawn of time, humanity has been trying to work out the relationship between the 'seen' and the 'unseen'; is there a hierarchy between so-called 'physical' and 'spiritual' realms? Is there a connection between the created order (and our bodies in it) and something intangible and 'other'? From Aristotle and Plato to the book of Psalms, there are many ancient takes on this. Arguably however, much of the Western imagination has been shaped by 17th Century philosopher, René Descartes who said that there is a clear and separable distinction (and hierarchy) between the

physical and the non-physical. Ultimately, his work suggests that the importance of bodies and the created order comes down to their role in *housing* soul and spirit – it's the inner, unseen world that really matters. I find it difficult to see that same distinction represented in Psalm 32 where forgiveness, sin, blame and deceit are mentioned in the same breath as silence, physical pain and weakness. The Psalmist clearly understands that what is done in the natural (speaking out) has an influence beyond what can be seen and vice versa. The 'deliverance' of God that reaches the Psalmist is *felt* – it has physical consequences as well as shaping the spiritual reality. Notice the change of tense and voice from v.8. onwards. The Psalmist has proclaimed the reality of God's forgiveness but now God speaks. The past tense also changes and is now oriented towards the future – as far as God is concerned, whatever is happening, is an ongoing process. Notice how God's voice echoes the Eden story. The happiness offered by God still comes in the form of a *covering* (v1). God's forgiveness is experienced as a *hiding place* (v7) God's counsel takes the form of the Psalmist being *seen* (v.8). Equally, the warning remains the same – do not be tempted into stubborn self-interest (v9). Happiness then, offered to God's people, as in Genesis, is not only an internal emotion but an outward expression of holistic well-being. The aim of human existence is to live in restored connection with self and God on the earth.

- Are you an extroverted or introverted processor? Can you empathise with the Psalmist's desire to speak out pain and angst? What effect does this have?
- Can you think of any other examples of people 'being covered' in the Bible. What images and emotions does this raise for you?
- This Psalm gives the impression that spiritual realities are mirrored in the physical world, but experience tells us this is not always the case. How do (and should) we respond when this happens?

Rom 5:12-19

The comparison Paul draws in Rom 5:12-19 reminds me of my tendency to always use too much food colouring when icing cakes. I've done it hundreds of times and I should know to trust my instincts – a few drops is always plenty – but every time I add the first, tiny bit, I can't seem to silence the voice in my head that says, "you need a bit more ... that's not going to spread far enough". Invariably, I end up with fluorescent pink icing rather than the nice pale shade I want. My perennial mistake is forgetting the nature of what I'm dealing with – it is more than capable of doing the job I need it to. This passage says to us, "so, you think sin and evil spread quickly and powerfully through the community? ... you ain't seen nothing yet!" The pivotal verse is surely v.15. But the free gift is not like the trespass. The nature of God's fix for human error and distrust is not on the same level as what caused it and therefore, not only can we be fully confident that it can achieve what is needed, if we want to participate, we must return to trusting in God's provision. The central idea here is akin to the

Gospels where Jesus is telling stories about gift-giving, sheep and birds (see Mt 7, 12 and Luke 12) and each time the pivotal line is, “how much more .. does God care and act on behalf of God’s children?” The point is that no matter which image you use to envisage what God offers, it is only a shadow of the reality. This is not to say that it is only the quantity of Jesus’ offering that is different to what has come before – everything about what Romans 5 highlights as *gifted* to humanity is gamechanging. To make it impossible to miss, the phrase “free gift” appears 5 times in this passage, reinforcing how what is on offer cannot be earned, bought nor somehow manipulated. The only way to join in; to engage in the real and full value of what is on offer, is to return to the trusting acceptance that was originally offered in the Garden. The kind of selfless dominion (v.17-18) that was spoiled by humanity because they could not resist using their position for self-benefit, allowed death to take charge for a while. But now that ‘reign’ (as the NIV translates ‘dominion’) has now passed to Jesus, there is no contest - what is now on offer blows what came before out of the water!

- Many people find the language of ‘governing’ or ‘ruling’ over someone problematic. In this passage (and the previous 2 this week), what are the differences between God’s governing/ ruling/ dominion and the other types of *reign* mentioned here?
- How do you feel when someone offers you a ‘free gift’? What dynamics are involved? How does our human nature respond?
- Split both this passage and Psalm 32 into ‘before’ and ‘after’ God intervenes. What are the difference in each case? What is the nature of the contrast? Is it the same or different?
- This passage shows how Jesus is both in continuity with and does things differently than they have been before. Try to explain this in the simplest terms possible. How does Jesus’ ‘free gift’ act as a connection point between what went before and what has been possible since?

Matthew 4:1-11

In each of our passages this week, we have seen a similar choice on offer. The crafty one presents humanity with a choice to trust in God’s caring provision or to take matters into their own hands. The Psalmist faces a similar decision between allowing the promises of God’s forgiveness and provision to define their reality or stubbornly asking for and working towards a more independent reality. So too Paul draws a clear distinction between the kind of life on offer in Jesus and the terms on which it is offered, and an alternative reality created under the reign of death. Against this backdrop, Jesus’ exchange with ‘the tempter’ in the desert in Matthew 4 comes into new focus. Just as the serpent in Genesis, the tempter presents Jesus with a truth wrapped in an untruth: *if* you are the son of God then ... X must be true. In contrast to humanity’s tendency to respond in self-interest, Jesus focuses on God’s willingness and ability to intervene when appropriate. Then, the tempter’s deception takes on another layer of trickery. The second time, the tempter not only bases their claims in Jesus’ identity, but also in God’s nature and character. In return, Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 6:16 where the full verse says, “Do not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah”. In Exodus 17, Moses names the place Massah and Meribah because the people quarreled and tested

the Lord. At the heart of Jesus' response to the tempter is a refusal to question God's presence as the Israelites did, "Is the Lord not among us?". For Jesus, the assurance of God's presence moved the goalposts; changes the game; redefines the rules. The third exchange reeks of desperation on the tempter's part but it is interesting that we end up where we began – the relationship between humanity and the created order. Jesus is shown the "glory" (some translate as 'splendour') of all the world. By using this word, the author of Matthew is setting up a similar contrast to those we have seen throughout the passages this week. The tempter's mistake is to get the connection between God, humanity and the created order wrong! The *glory* does not belong to anything in the created order (not the tempter nor the kingdoms themselves). As Jesus demonstrates in the final two verses of this passage by being served by angels himself, all of creation (the tempter included) is invited to participate in a two-way relationship with God and creation: to give *and* to receive.

- Jesus follows in the footsteps of Israel. What parallels can you find between how Jesus reacts here and the wanderings of God's people in the Old Testament?
- What kinds of 'temptation' do you find it most difficult to resist? Are they 'physical' or 'spiritual' or is that an unhelpful distinction?
- If this story was being re-told in a 21st Century setting, what kinds of temptations do you think would make good equivalents to those in Matthew 4?
- What have been the key threads running through the 4 passages we've considered this week? If someone who has never read the Bible asked you what you have been learning, how would you explain it?

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