

**10 Feb 2008 Lent 1 Empowered by God's Word
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Matthew 4: 1-11**

There's a wonderful kind of counterpoint in today's readings. On the one hand you get Adam and Eve succumbing to temptation, though not without a bit of a struggle; and on the other Jesus winning out over temptation, although again not without a struggle.

And what fascinates me is that in both cases the response offered to Satan is to quote what God has said. Eve: "God said: you shall not eat of the fruit of the tree." Jesus: "You shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." The difference is that Jesus is absolutely secure in that knowledge, but Eve is not.

So the demon of doubt coils itself around Eve's heart in a scene straight out of the Disney Jungle Book, as Ka coils himself tight around Mowgli and sings "Trust in me", hypnotising him all the while. And this is exactly what Satan does, first of all insinuating doubt: Did God say? Are you sure? And then flatly contradicting God: You will not die! And finally going in for the kill: God knows you'll be like him if you eat this fruit.

Whatever doubts might have been in her mind before, doubts about herself or doubts about God, Satan plays on them masterfully. Is this the truth or just some great divine con? Maybe God hates me or just wants to keep me ignorant like a slave. Is God just the Wizard of Oz? You know, you follow life's Yellow Brick Road with all its perils only to discover the Great Wizard Of Oz is just a little man hiding behind a curtain, bossing people around through a glorified megaphone.

Having been given everything, Eve and Adam now feel that maybe God's holding out on them. And so they eat, and in so doing they initiate the first in an endless web of doubts and sins and suspicions and hatreds that echoes in our lives and our hearts to this day. Does God love me? Is life against me? Who's to blame for the way my life's turned out? Why did I ever taste the sour apple of all those things I regret? - the things I've done, and the things done to me.

And from the moment Satan goes slithering off into the long grass, his work done, you see everything unravelling. Love and sex arouse a shame not planted in them by God. God calls to them as he always did, and they hide. God asks them to tell their story and Adam blames Eve. In the Old Testament according to Spike Milligan, Adam says: "The woman gave me and I did eat the apple", going on to add: "A Granny Smith".

But whatever the fruit, the tragedy is here to stay until or unless a new Adam shows us the way back – and not so much the way back to a mythical paradise, but the way back to trust.

There is a wonderful, terrible painting in Florence, one of the most ground-breaking works of the early Renaissance by a painter called Masaccio, of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden. There is the angel, clothed in red, fiery sword in hand pointing them away from paradise lost towards a desert which Adam will only make fruitful by the sweat of his brow and where Eve will bear her children in pain. It's a ground-breaking painting because it shows Adam and Eve displaying human emotion in a way that is more raw than their actual, physical nakedness. A later ruler of Florence had fig leaves painted over a nudity he clearly found shocking, but far more shocking is the anguish of Adam and Eve over what they have lost. Eve's face is a harrowing mask of tragedy, Adam hides his face in his hands. They are like children overwhelmed by fear, and they are us – a famous prayer to Our Lady refers to us as "poor banished children of Eve, weeping and wailing in this vale of tears".

Now there are two things to say here. One is that this is how it is – this is how we sometimes feel, like abandoned children. When things don't turn out the way you hoped, the rug is pulled out from under your feet, this is how we feel whether we're nine or ninety. But the second thing to say is that there is another story to tell here. There is an alternative ending, perhaps an answer to the question of what would have happened if perhaps Eve had cooked the snake instead of eating the apple.

We know, of course that, no matter what, there is always a snake, there's always a cause for doubt, there's always a challenge to our sense of ourselves and our sense of God. But the alternative ending is played out on the desert sands by Jesus. And the huge difference is that Jesus takes God at his word. Ringing in his ears he still has God's words at his baptism: You are my beloved. And it is on this rock-solid conviction that he stands, not impervious to temptation (because he gets them all) but able to withstand whatever Satan throws at him.

Is he actually tempted? Of course he is. He's hungry – not just in some symbolic, spiritual way. He must have wondered what on earth he was doing there – and Satan offered him a way to never have to face loneliness and hunger and fear again: “All these kingdoms and their splendour I will give to you...” Maybe from where he was he could even see Herod's great palace at Masada high up on a rock, with its hanging gardens and its hot baths, and other comforts too no doubt, and Satan's saying he can have it all; but Jesus is secure in the one thing that sheds light into a dark place and a dark time – God's word, summed up in one word: Love.

In that desert place, when I feel like howling like Eve, or hiding like Adam, when I think it's all over, I'm abandoned and lost, then the spiritual armour of Jesus is ours. Who am I? I'm the beloved. Eve wasn't sure who she was in relation to God. *Did* God say? Through Jesus, we know what God says, because he says it through the whole drama of his life: You are my beloved. In the wilderness and on the Cross, and on Easter Day.

Lent is for reclaiming our belovedness, for rediscovering hope and courage, and for coming home.
Amen.