

## **Sermon for 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2026, 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent, Year A**

**Preached at St Serf's Shettleston**

**Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11**

### **Sermon**

Our readings for the first Sunday of Lent are, on the face of it, all about temptation and the differences between how Adam and Jesus respond to it. They are two very well-known stories – the eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and the forty days and forty nights that Jesus spends in the wilderness being tempted by the devil.

Although the first scene with Adam and Eve being tempted by the serpent is indeed very familiar, that familiarity can lead us to gloss over some interesting details. I mean, it's hard to take a story about talking serpents very seriously, isn't it? So, we might hear the story and just say, well, it's a myth about how human disobedience towards God led to humanity being ejected from the bliss of paradise. It's an attempted answer to the question: if God is good, and everything he made is good, why is life so hard and full of struggle and turmoil and broken relationships and violence? According to *this* story, life is hard because our first ancestors broke God's rules and we were all punished in perpetuity.

St Augustine in the 5<sup>th</sup> century took this story and developed the concept of 'original sin' – the idea that we're all born with sinful disobedience built into our nature as a result of Adam and Eve. He taught that the moment we enter the world we're already destined for hell unless the problem is fixed by baptism. Baptism was considered to cure original sin, which is why it was thought that it was impossible to get to heaven unless you had been baptised.

I've never been convinced by 'original sin'. It makes it sound like there's something broken in us that blocks God from loving us. For the Reformers, it

did however explain why Jesus had to die on the cross. Because of this mistake by Adam and Eve, it was impossible for God to love us and include us again in his family until Jesus came, passed the test of temptation that Adam and everyone since him had failed, and then paid the penalty for Adam and Eve's disobedience by being punished on the cross in our place.

Logically that seems to work, but it hardly seems to fit at all with our understanding of God as a loving Father, Mother, and parent, who weeps for our mistakes and corrects us when we make bad moral choices, but who always welcomes us back with open arms as soon as there's even the slightest glimmer of a change in our hearts. Jesus' story of the prodigal son for example, with the father rushing out to forgive the son before he can even apologise, conveys a much more generous understanding of God's love for humanity than most early and medieval Christian theologians would be able to tolerate, at least in the Western Church.

So, what is going on in this Genesis story?

One of the most striking things for me is the difference between this creation story and many other creation stories of the ancient world in which humanity is created as a by-product, an accident, or even a mistake by the gods. In contrast, Genesis portrays humanity as having an important purpose, which is to "till and keep" the garden of Eden, which contains all the animals and plants that God has previously created.

One scholar argues that the phrase 'till and keep' would be much better translated as 'serve and protect', or 'be a slave of and preserve'. This gives the impression that humanity's original role was as gardeners or foresters or rangers, protecting creation from damage and exploitation. This is very different to any presumption we might have that our purpose is to rule over creation and exploit it for our own gain. Creation wasn't created for us to exploit, but we were created to be its servants and stewards.

This isn't something that is fundamentally broken within us. We could turn around tomorrow and decide as a society to live in a way that reflects this vocation. Plenty of people do. There are all sorts of intentional communities both religious and non-religious around the world who come together to try to live in a way that serves, guards and enhances creation rather than exploits and damages it. Some peoples and cultures have always lived that way. But there's no doubt that the majority of humanity are still trying to carve out our own private kingdoms whether large or small, because if we don't then we're afraid no one else will share with us, let alone serve and protect us.

The more we strive for control and power, the more isolated we become, and the more we *need* control and power to be secure. But in the beginning the Genesis story tells us that our relationship with God was one of trust, obedience and intimacy, perhaps like the trust between a mother and her young child.

At some point, probably during teenage years, that trust is likely be severely tested, and may even break down. The trigger is probably some rule that the child no longer sees any reason to obey. The result is alienation, and lost innocence, but the bond of love remains, albeit wounded. The love of a parent never ceases to reach out for the child, hoping for reconciliation, and so it is with God.

As we see in the parable of the prodigal son, and in this story of the forbidden fruit, and in our own lives, when we become selfish and take for ourselves what we were meant to share with others, it harms everything and everyone around us, and most of all ourselves. We become mean-spirited, bitter and unkind. We still insist that we'll happily share all the fruit of the garden, but only once we've established that it all belongs to us.

As usual, Jesus shows us the better way. The devil comes to *him* in the desert and tries to tempt him with the selfish use of power. You don't need to trust your relationship with your Father, the devil says. You are his Son – you can make these stones become bread if you want to.

By the way, when the devil says, “*if* you are the Son of God”, it’s not intended to doubt Jesus’ identity. It’s meant more in the sense of “since you are the Son of God”. The devil isn’t saying ‘prove it’, he’s saying, “use your undoubted power to make your life more comfortable”. He’s saying, “Exploit the world for your benefit. Take the fruit for yourself. You deserve it”.

Again, the devil tries to persuade Jesus to exploit his relationship with God. “God won’t let you come to harm. You can do anything. God will protect you.”

A third time, the devil tempts Jesus with power. “You deserve all these kingdoms – all this stuff. *Why shouldn’t* you have it after all? The world is made for you to rule in any way you choose.”

But Jesus refuses to exploit the power he has, whether as the divine Son of God or as a fully human being. He will not damage the trust, obedience, and intimacy he shares with his Father, not for anything. Three times the devil tempts him to use power, and three times Jesus responds by affirming his humble and obedient relationship with God. “One lives by the word that comes from the mouth of God. Do not put God to the test. Worship only God.”

Often, we look at Jesus’ death on the cross and his resurrection as the central focus of our faith, that moment when Jesus fixes the damaged relationship that Adam and Eve had with God and the world; but for me, it’s this much more humble decision in the desert that is the cornerstone of everything Jesus was and did. This decision is *why* he ends up on the cross. After this moment, there could be no other outcome.

Even more importantly he’s showing us that this is a decision that we all can make. It doesn’t take power to do it – in fact it takes a deliberate decision to turn away from power, to choose instead our relationships of intimacy and dependence on God and one another. This is something that all of humanity can do. We are made for it, after all. The forbidden fruit that Adam and Eve craved was never meant for us. Love was. Therefore, choose love, vulnerability, and humility, not power, security, and selfishness. This is the way of Jesus Christ.