



Sunday 18 February 2024

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*Genesis 2: 15–17   Romans 5: 12–19*

On a Saturday in July, 1763, Dr Johnson and his friend James Boswell took a boat from the Temple-stairs and crossed over the Thames to Greenwich. Boswell questioned whether education was really necessary for the generality of mankind. Johnson conceded that there were avocations where learning was unnecessary. Being a sculler in a Thames ferry, for example. Johnson said the boy sculler in their boat “rows as well without learning, as if he could sing the song of the Argonauts, who were the first sailors”. He then called out to the boy, “What would you give, my lad, to know about the Argonauts?” “Sir” (said the boy), “I would give what I have”.

The answer pleased Johnson and then, to Boswell, “Sir (said he) a desire of knowledge is the natural feeling of mankind; and every human being, whose mind is not debauched, will be willing to give all that he has, to get knowledge”.

You are to consider, during this Lent, Christ’s assertion, in the Fourth Gospel, that he came that humanity should have life and should have it more abundantly. And you would not be here, in this learned society, if you did not believe, with Samuel Johnson, that human beings would and should give all they have to get knowledge. The pursuit of knowledge, more and more of it, for its own sake, is surely the whole point of a University. The more we know, the more we recognise our ignorance, and the more we wish to know.

But then we have this evening’s lesson, the passage of Scripture set by the Church for the First Sunday in Lent, in which the Lord God forbids the Man and the Woman to eat of the Tree of Knowledge. They disobey him. And in consequence, they are driven out of Paradise into the complicated world of work, and death, and pain.

Paul, in his commentary on the story in Genesis – which was read for the second lesson – sees death as Adam’s bequest to his descendants. Adam brought death, but the new Adam, Jesus Christ, brought life.

That certainly seems to be one strand of the story in Genesis, though whether that means that the original story, or stories, of the Garden of Eden, originating in Mesopotamia, contain even a hint of the idea of Original Sin, is another question. Also another question, to which I do not feel qualified to address myself, is whether the original Mesopotamian folk-tale has two trees – the tree of life, and the tree of knowledge - both of which are forbidden, or whether the multiple authorship of the Genesis narratives has somehow combined two symbolic events: humanity coming to terms with its mortality, and humanity confronting the possibility of forbidden knowledge.

Some people reading this story might think – the serpent is implying, to the woman, that God would somehow be jealous if humanity, God’s creatures, got above itself and began to develop the sort of moral judgements of which, until this point, God alone has been

capable. But there is surely another way of looking at it, and that is, that the serpent is telling the truth.

“For god doth know, that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil”.(Gen 3:5). The Septuagint has “like Gods”, which might mean, “like the divine beings at the Heavenly court”, like angels. The knowledge of good and evil, in Biblical context, is the knowledge of everything. It is what the Bible calls Wisdom. In the new revised version of the Bible, the snake tells the woman, “you will be” not like gods, but “like God, knowing Good and Evil”. (Gen 3:5)

It is the woman, Eve, and not Adam, who yields to this temptation. Later readings of the story, such as that of Milton in *Paradise Lost*, see the serpent as the Fallen Archangel Satan in disguise. But Genesis does not say this. The snake in this story is simply the cleverest of the animals. And the animals, so far as we know – our cousins in the garden – have all sorts of qualities, but they do not have speculative minds. They can be clever, but they cannot acquire what the Bible calls Wisdom. They cannot sin .

Adam and Eve, before they feast from the Tree of Wisdom, or the Tree of Knowledge, are not really any different from the other animals, except in so far as God has breathed into them his life, (Gen 2:7). It was always His intention to make humanity (Gen 1:26) in his own image, and it therefore can have been no surprise to Him that the woman, followed by the man, would disobey his injunction and eat from the Tree of Knowledge.

For a short while, they were able to enjoy the happy, instinctive life of Paradise in which moral puzzles did not present themselves. But for the duration of such a life, they were not really fully human. They had not evolved from the apelike happiness of tending the fruit trees and enjoying one another’s company. They did not know they were naked, and the whole complex story of human life, in all its riches, in all its abundance, in all its pain, was not possible for them.

The first Adam, even in this primitive moment of pre-history, anticipates the Second Adam. The Lord God has reached out to him, not, perhaps like a bossy schoolmaster, telling the children that the tree was out of bounds, but like a loving father who wishes to spare them, Adam and Eve, the pain of being like him, a pain which will eventually lead to Calvary. In the Liturgy, the priest says a prayer which is so awe-inspiring, so shocking, that it almost distracts us from what seems to be the central point of the rite. “By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity”. We only overhear this – it is said quietly, and some celebrants say it sotto voce. It is the quiet secret of the Eucharist. We kneel to see the bread and wine transformed into Christ, and then we realise that it is WE, as much as the bread and the wine, who are going to be transformed – if we let it. If we let HIM.

The first step towards the process of transformation was, by the supreme paradox of the story in Genesis, when we disobeyed, and ate of the Tree. But it was a first step, because it revealed to us what God had done when he breathed life into us – a different life from the life breathed into our cousins in the garden – the hedgehogs, and the chimps and the butterflies. He gave us abundantly of the gift to be complicated. He gave us a thirst for ever-more abundant knowledge, and, as we all know, that brings us so many sources of joy, fascination, interest, improvement, of our own lives and of the lives of the planet itself. He gave us the wherewithal to destroy ourselves, to spoil ourselves, to discard the gift. But we have all these capacities because they come from him, and we are made in his image. Though our quest for knowledge will take us to the moon and back, and enable us to learn languages, mathematics, and every branch of knowledge you could name, there is one inbuilt knowledge which it does not need cleverness to acquire. It is the knowledge of his

voice in our hearts when we do evil, as when we do good. It is the knowledge that by directing our hearts aright, as we try to do each season of Lent, we might indeed be changed from glory to glory, and come to share in the divinity of one who – even stranger than our inbuilt divinity – came to share in our humanity