

One of the most unusual commentaries on the temptation of Eve in the garden comes from Irenaeus of Lyon. Irenaeus was a Greek who grew up in what is now Izmir, Turkey, in the first half of the 2nd century. He became bishop of Lyons after year AD 177. In his most famous work, *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus enlists the help of the prophet Elisha to describe the work of Christ as an undoing of the confusion that begins at the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Elisha, the disciple and successor of Elijah, goes down to the river Jordan with the sons of the prophets, his disciples.¹ While they are building a new dwelling, there is an accident:

But as one was felling a beam, the axe head fell into the water: and he cried, and said, Alas, master! [Elisha] for it was borrowed. And the man of God said, Where fell it? And he shewed him the place. And he cut down a stick, and cast it in thither; and the iron did swim.²

Irenaeus' reflections on this story are perhaps not the first ones which would come to mind: 'By this action the prophet pointed out that the sure word of God, which we had negligently lost by means of a tree [in the Garden of Eden]...³ we should receive anew by the dispensation of a tree, [viz., the cross of Christ]'. For Irenaeus, the head of the axe which fell in the Jordan is a symbol of the sharp and powerful word of God.⁴

Whatever you think about how he reaches his conclusions, Irenaeus' emphasis can help us to see what is going on in Genesis 3. The first words of the tempter to Eve mix up and conceal the word of God. Eve corrects the serpent, but her answer also muddles God's words, and suggests some resentment or suspicion.⁵ Only then does the serpent directly challenge God's words: – you won't die, says the serpent, God is just trying to keep you like children – go on, grow up, think for yourself, try it.⁶ She takes the fruit, and looking for knowledge, she and Adam instead know evil from the inside.

For Irenaeus, the confusion of half hearing or half understanding God's promises and God's command is what happens at the tree in the garden. The wood of the cross is the cross-shaped key which lifts up the word of God from the depths and unlocks the Scriptures. At the end of the Lenten journey, this wood reveals the love of Christ which passes knowledge.⁷

¹ 2 Kings 6.1-7

² 2 Kgs 6.5-6

³ >, and were not in the way of finding again,>

⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.17.4: 'For that the word of God is likened to an axe, John the Baptist declares [when he says] in reference to it, But now also is the axe laid to the root of the trees. [Matthew 3:10] Jeremiah also says to the same purport: The word of God cleaves the rock as an axe [Jeremiah 23:29, LXX]'. 'This word, then, what was hidden from us, did the dispensation of the tree make manifest'.

⁵ God had invited Adam to Eve to eat of all the trees of the garden except this particular tree. The serpent, on the other hand, suggests that God forbid them the food of all the trees. Eve corrects the serpent, but something of the serpent's tricks have already affected her, and she adds to what God commanded, 'neither touch it'.

⁶ Eve comes to agree with the serpent, maybe not all of it, but enough to hurt her – God's words fade in the background, and confronted with attractive fruit and the beguiling words of the serpent.

⁷ So says Irenaeus again, 'For as we lost [the word of God] by means of a tree, by means of a tree again was it made manifest to all, showing the height, the length, the breadth, the depth in itself'. Irenaeus' evokes St Paul's description of the love of God in Ephesians 3.17-19, that 'being rooted and grounded in love' you 'may be able to comprehend

Ok, I admit it, not everyone follows Irenaeus' interpretation exactly. More of the Fathers see in the axe which sinks to the bottom of the Jordan a picture of human nature which is weighed down by sin and gets stuck in the mire, confused and weakened.⁸ 'Alas, master! [Elisha] for it was borrowed'. This description makes the axe-head an even better symbol of human nature. Most fundamentally, we do not belong to ourselves, we are borrowed, our lives are the free gift of God – we are the coin which bears the image of our King. We belong to God twice over – by creation and by our being raised up from the mire and given new life from above.⁹

When our Lord is tempted in the wilderness, the Word of God which was lost and confused in the garden becomes whole and complete for us again. 'If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down; for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee' – 'Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God'. The devil appears to offer our Lord what he offered Eve, a radical freedom outside of the purposes and wisdom of God. But Christ sees and reads more truly than Eve – he reveals that the devil's offer of freedom from all law is really an invitation to self-destruction and slavery. To live according to the contours of God's love is not to be trapped in a cage, but it does mean inhabiting a landscape with definite contours, God's love has both a givenness as well as a richness of possibility. In Christ, water can become wine and human love can become a wedding feast of divine love. At the same time, some things, rocks in the Gospel for today, are not meant to be manipulated for our purposes. The wood of the cross restores the key to see the difference.

It is the devil's trick to present our belonging to God not as the most extraordinary and wonderful gift, but as a kind of slavery and oppression. (It can be admitted that sometimes the servants of God have unwittingly helped the devil in this trick, and lived or taught as if free grace was a threat rather than a promise.) To be borrowed, to belong to God, is the promise that our identity and hopes rest on the most solid foundation. The future may be unclear, and shrouded in uncertainty, work-life may be uncertain, and perhaps family life doesn't give us the home we are looking for. Our abilities, physical or mental, may not be what we want, or poor health may rob us of something important. But more foundational than all of these, Christ has restored us to God and to ourselves. Christ the Word and wisdom of God has lifted us up to know and love and serve him in whatever our circumstances, however weak, or troubled, or gifted we are.

This is all gift, but it also comes with a challenge – what we receive and ask for ourselves, we also receive and claim for others. Last week after mass I spoke about Frank Weston, Bishop of Zanzibar from 1908 to 1924, and the speech he gave at the second Anglo-Catholic Conference in 1923. He argued that we cannot adore Christ in the blessed sacrament, without looking for him, without earnestly searching for him, in the face of

with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God'.

⁸ In the words of Psalm 69.1-2: 'Save me, O God, for the waters are come in ... I stick fast in the deep mire, where no ground is: I am come into deep waters, so that the floods run over me'. See Caesarius of Arles, Tertullian, Justin Martyr, Ephrem the Syrian, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, Old Testament, vol 5, on 2 Kings, pp. 171-2. Also C Wordsworth in his commentary on this passage in *The Holy Bible with Notes*, vol. 3 p 106. Also Jones of Nayland in his *Discourse* supplemental to his sermons on *The Figurative Language of Holy Scripture* (1786). Jones examines the significance of the details of the story: how 'the head of the axe, being the better part' corresponds to 'the soul or spirit of man, the better part of him', and how the 'borrowed' axe-head symbolises the soul which belongs first to God. The iron on the bottom of the river is like 'the soul of man ... under the dominion of death', which is then raised up by the power of Christ's resurrection after this 'branch of the stem of Jesse' was first 'cut down, and cast with us into the waters of death' (Jones, *Works* in 6 volumes, vol 3. p. 204).

⁹ The power and virtue of the wood of the cross reaches and the Word of God reaches all the way to the depths of death and raises up humanity from the mire.

the poor or of the most vulnerable.¹⁰ Human dignity, our preciousness in the sight of God, does not depend on our abilities, our wealth or status, or our health.¹¹ Raised up from the mire by the same wood of the cross, invited to feed on the fruit of the tree of life, called to the embrace of the same love, all of us have equal dignity. As a white Englishman in Zanzibar, Bishop Weston understood these challenges, and was prepared to address them bluntly: ‘Colour prejudice is evil. Christ was a “coloured” man’.¹² Having one foot stuck with the axe-head in the mud of the Jordan, even after we are raised up, may make it difficult to see the common dignity of all who have been inscribed with the image of God and called to grown in His likeness. Differences of race, or accent, or birth, or education can tempt us to forget our common dignity. To accept the saving embrace of Christ for ourselves, is also to reach out to accept and choose that embrace for others. Of course, this does not mean, thank God, that there are not differences between us, some glorious, and some less so. One of the purposes of difference is to call us to receive what we need from others and to give of ourselves.¹³

Our belonging to God is not a threat, not something to hold us down. To be borrowed is to describe the beginning and end of our lives and possibilities in the life of the Triune God. This is the highest dignity. Our belonging to God is the solid foundation on which to build, the fruitful soil which brings forth one-hundredfold.

In many ways, Weston’s call to care for the most needy is one which is taken up and accepted. Governments in this country may disagree about exactly *how* to care for those in need, but most people recognize the seriousness of the claim.¹⁴ But there are also areas of sharp divergence, and this is especially so when we consider how we hear the call to care for the most vulnerable at both ends of life.

In a few weeks we will celebrate the feast of the Annunciation, the visit of the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary. With her ‘be it unto me according to thy word’ and by the Holy Spirit, she is with child. And what a picture of human dignity and of the dignity of women this festival offers! Almighty God waits upon Mary’s free consent, the Lord of heaven and earth chooses to remain powerless before this young woman, waiting for her ‘be it onto me’. This divine waiting is full of significance for how we wait upon one another and cherish one another.

¹⁰ ‘When you come out from before your tabernacles, you must walk with Christ, mystically present in you, through the streets of this country, and find the same Christ in the people of your cities and your villages. You cannot claim to worship Jesus in the tabernacle if you do not pity Jesus in the slum ... It is folly, it is madness, to suppose that you can worship Jesus in the sacrament and Jesus on the throne of glory when you are sweating Him in the bodies and souls of his children ... You have your Mass, you have your altars, you have begun to have your tabernacles. Now go out into the highways and hedges, and look for Jesus in the ragged and the naked, in the oppressed and the sweated, in those who have lost hope and in those who are struggling to make good. Look for Jesus in them; and, when you find Him, gird yourselves with His towel of fellowship, and wash his feet in the person of His brethren.’ F. Weston, *Defence of the English Catholic*, pp. 34-35, quoted in *Anglican Theological Review* 85:2, Mark Chapman, ‘Christ and the Gethsemane of Mind: Frank Weston Then and Now’, p 284

¹¹ The phrase ‘quality of life’ can be a way of describing the difficulties which come with poor health, but ‘quality of life’ can also be a terrible and corrosive expression which suggests a life without speech or mobility, or intellect, is not precious.

¹² The Pan-Anglican Conference, *The Church’s Mission in Christendom*, Vol 6, Section E, speeches and papers published for consideration of the conference (London, 1908), p. 134, quoted in *The Oxford History of Anglicanism, Volume V: Global Anglicanism, c. 1910-2000*, p. 41.

¹³ see, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1934-1938 on ‘Equality and Differences among Men’.

¹⁴ This is one place where call of Jesus and social norms overlap in many ways. This is not a surprise of course, so much of our social and cultural priorities are shaped by the Gospel message, however imperfectly, institutions and laws can in some measure embody ideas which may not be embraced so broadly anymore. This is the subject of Tom Holland’s recent book, *Dominion*. As an agnostic, he describes the way in which Christ-like principles live in laws and norms even when the claim of his voice is not recognized.

As the mother of the divine son, the one who is our life, Blessed Mary, full of grace, becomes the New Eve, the Mother of all the living. Nine months before the feast of the Nativity, Christians through the ages have celebrated the Annunciation as the feast of the Incarnation. The Incarnation is not the gift of Christmas, the Incarnation is the gift of the Annunciation.

This has obvious implications for how we understand the beginning of life, and what the gift and security of belonging to God asks of us. This is a difficult topic, and one which I even broach with caution and trepidation. I have often wondered if I fail to fulfil my vocation to be a watchman and a messenger when I say so little about how the call to care for the vulnerable reaches to the very beginnings of life, to conception. Alongside that, it is terribly difficult to do this in a way that does credit to the struggles people experience, to the competing voices and pressures which shape who we are and how we see the world. This makes it a painful subject for many, not abstract or distant, and emotions can run very high and be easily trampled upon. Christians of good-will can come to different conclusions about end or beginning of life questions. God's message is always one of mercy. That does not mean that all answers are equally good expressions of the claims of the love and wisdom of God.

Sally Phillips, graduate of New College, a writer, TV presenter and actress, produced a documentary a few years ago asking if this country has space for her son Olly.¹⁵ Olly has Down's Syndrome, and Sally Phillips continues to speak about the pressures which lead more and more couples to decide to end pregnancies after a prediction of Down's Syndrome. Last summer, Sally Phillips spoke to the Royal College of Gynaecologists. She argued that many women and couples are given misleading and incomplete information and she described why more and more women and couples feel pressured to come to what has become the majority decision.¹⁶ For parents who believe that their Down's Syndrome children have been a gift to them and to the world, the statistics are shocking. Sally Phillips emphasizes that the people involved in these situations are not bad people, no more blind or wise than the rest of us. She sympathizes with struggles of parents who are frightened. But she wants us to look as directly at this question as we have been forced to do in issues of racism. In her words:

‘Although nobody wants to be called eugenic, if individual decisions now are made within a system and in a context which is biased and overwhelmingly carries them towards certain outcomes on the discovery of difference, then the end result is the same as if you had coerced them in the first place.’¹⁷

If most of the pressures go in one direction and lead to one outcome, is it really a free decision, and whose freedom or future gets the priority? We hold up the ideal of freedom and choice, and we hold up the call to care for the most vulnerable. These appear to be in conflict. It seems to be a characteristic of our age that our moral systems attempt to hold together, but sometimes fail to do so, competing goods and hopes. We have fragments of goodness and truth, but we find it hard to put them together, to think and live them with integrity.¹⁸

¹⁵ BBC2 documentary, ‘A World Without Down's Syndrome?’, aired 6 Oct, 2016.

¹⁶ Tuesday, 18th June 2019, the World Congress of the Royal College of Gynaecologists, London.

¹⁷ Sally Phillips: ‘Human Dignity, Different Lives & the Illusions of Choice’, Theos Think Tank: Understanding faith. Enriching society (2019/11/29)

¹⁸ In another way, our moral sensibility is shaped by ideas about life and goodness which come to us with a system of faith, and since we are not supposed to think systems of faith in the public sphere some of these ideals are discredited and replaced with other systems of faith with different names. This is partly inspired by Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, partly by George Grant, *English Speaking Justice* (Toronto: Anansi 1985), p. 175: ‘The contradiction arose because human beings held onto certain aspects of justice which they had found in the ancient account of good, even after they no longer considered that that account of good helped them to understand the way things are. The content of justice was largely given them from its foundations in the Bible (and the classical philosophy which the early Christians

The purpose of raising these issues is not to give any of us the opportunity to feel self-righteous and smug. We are all implicated in these challenges; social norms don't exist on the outside, social norms exist within us, sometimes even when we disagree with them. It's possible to hold good principles and fail to live them, and it's possible to hold false principles and live with a Christ-like love. I agree with Sally Phillips, and at the same time she has revealed to me some of my selfishness and prejudices which I did not realize I had: Son of David, Lord Jesus, have mercy.

In Christ we see the Word of God restored to us. He comes to us to be tempted on our behalf. Without his example, and more, without his love and wisdom indwelling us, shaping us from the inside out as well as the outside in, we would still be stuck with the axe-head in the mire. We are borrowed, we belong to God, that is our hope and the foundation of a truly human freedom. It is also a calling which does not fit comfortably with merely human categories. The disentangling of what is good and true from what is not is part of what is going on in the temptations in the wilderness. Considering Bishop Weston's call to seek Jesus in the most vulnerable helps us to see the contours of the divine love which both saves us and challenges us, to embrace the promise of belonging to God not just for ourselves but for others. The journey of Lent is the Journey towards and in the Love of God which draws together and raises up of the fragments of goodness and truth we have been given. This love and wisdom judges all our loves, and it saves and heals us.

It is the Spirit which drives our Lord into the wilderness. We ought not to be surprised by temptations, or discouraged by them – the Spirit leads us to the place where we encounter temptation. Whatever spiritual disciplines we are given grace to choose, are an invitation to cooperate with the Spirit. There are real dangers in the wilderness, we can be led astray, we can mix up and confuse the saving word and wisdom of God. But even in our confusions, Christ can lead us back to himself – that is in part why he is tempted for us, to reveal the character of temptation, and to provide a remedy and a way home. Let us pray for grace to bear with our confusions and trials, let us learn to find the joy and peace, the ground of freedom, which comes with our belonging to God. We find this joy and peace when we live with and within the contours and possibilities of the divine love, and not just for ourselves, but for one another. May we seek and find our Lord in his saving and healing word. Let us seek and find him in the weak forms of the sacrament of his all-sufficient body and blood. And let us seek and find him in the faces of all who bear his image and carry his likeness, faces often very different from our own. Let us go up to Jerusalem together, to the manifestation of the love and wisdom of God in the cross, the tree of life, to a beginning made new for us in Christ.

thought necessary for understanding the Bible), while they understood the world increasingly in terms of modern technological science. The desire to have both what was given in the new knowledge, and what was given us about justice in the religious and philosophical traditions, produced many conscious and unconscious attempts at practical and theoretical reconciliations. It is these attempts which make it not inaccurate to call the early centuries of modern liberal Europe the era of secularized Christianity.'