

Their eyes were opened

A talk given in the @915 service on the Second Sunday after Trinity, 9th June 2024, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

So we have that story from the very beginning of the Bible about what first went wrong in human beings' place in God's world. People often have questions around these stories in the Book of Genesis: are they real? Is it history? How literally should we take them?

You'll find different views in the churches about that. My own view is that we don't need to take it literally. We don't need to read it as actual history, and if we do that we tend to go down rabbit holes asking the wrong sorts of questions. My own view is that these are stories that tell us about the place of human beings in the world, what a world it is, and what kind of a God has made the world and put us in it. It's all about those big questions of who we are and who is the God with whom we're in relationship? It's interesting that if you compare this story with some of the other stories that were around in the ancient world that give an account of how the world began and the picture in those other stories is very different. There, the gods are a nasty warring bunch (there's not just one God, there's a whole load) - they create human beings in order to provide armies for their battles and fights between the gods. But in the Bible, God creates human beings not to take part in any battles or divisions, but in order to tend God's good creation, to make it fruitful. In the other stories, human beings only produce food in order to give it to the gods - they're slaves of the gods.

But in the Bible, human beings make food for themselves. They're put in the garden in order to till it and tend it. We have there a basic statement of what human beings are put in the world to do. We're here to make the world fruitful and to sustain life and to till it and to tend it. I guess you could read that not just as being about food, but about being creative in all sorts of ways to help life in the world to flourish and to realise its potential. So this story gives us a basic view of the human vocation to look after God's world and to make it fruitful, to till it and to tend it.

There's a permission to enjoy the world and you may freely eat of every tree of the garden. We're put in the world to enjoy it, to make it as fruitful as possible and to get the benefit of that. Don't have to hand over the fruits of our endeavours to the gods, but we're here to enjoy everything that this life and this world affords.

But there is also a prohibition: 'of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat. For in the day that you eat of it, you shall die.' So that prohibition is just a reminder that in the end, we are creatures: we do have limits; we're not eternal; we're not infinite; and we're not on our own; we've been put in the world by God, and we're expected to respond to God, to take account of him. So there is a limit to the freedom that we've been given. It's a generous freedom, but we're not like God. There is a boundary to our existence. So this story gives us that sense of human beings being put here to look after the world, to enjoy it, to make it flourish, and to make it fruitful, but also to remember that in the end, it's all a gift from God, and we need to acknowledge that.

Then, of course, there's this story of the temptation and of the serpent rather misleading the man and the woman about what will happen if they eat the fruit of the tree of good and evil. In a

sense, that story isn't really about the food as such, it's about their unwillingness to trust God - they want to become like gods; they want to manage as if there is no God, and if there is no God. If you like, that's the definition of sin - it's living as if there is no God, as if we're each of us mini-gods who can take God's place. But the story there is of people casting off that restraint, trying to become like God. At the heart of it is this sense of eating a forbidden fruit, this sense that you are what you eat. The food that was meant to sustain and to give life and to allow not just human beings, but all living creatures to flourish, this fruit becomes instead a symbol of human rebellion, human self-sufficiency, human determination to go our own way and to leave God out of the picture.

So what's so wrong about eating a fruit? Why is eating something so bad? - it's not about the food itself, it's about the lack of trust that the action represents and the consequence is the eyes of both Adam and Eve were opened and they knew that they were naked and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. So the result of trying to go their own way, of leaving God out of the picture, of living as if they can take his place, is that they then become ashamed. They feel bad about themselves. They feel alienated from one another and from God. Their instinct is to hide, to cover themselves up, and to run away - and we've been doing that ever since. And so embedded in this story is this image of the fruit, a thing that should be a sign of life, of sustenance, of fruitfulness literally, of the goodness of the world that God has put us in. It becomes instead a sign of human rebellion, human sinfulness, human determination to leave God out of the picture.

And as a result, human beings see themselves differently. Their eyes were opened. They become self-conscious. They don't like themselves very much. They start to have a low self-image. All these things that we're so familiar with in our own lives in the world today. We can see it all being brought out in this story.

But there is good news because there is one other point in the Bible which talks about the eyes of people being opened. It's the story of the supper at Emmaus on the first Easter day. Two disciples are walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus, and they're depressed and sad and grieving because Jesus has been put to death on the cross. They're joined by this stranger who talks to them about what's happened, and they don't recognise him. He opens the scriptures to them to show them how it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and die, and then on the third day, be raised again. When they get to their destination in the village of Emmaus, they invite him in for a meal, for supper; and they invite him to say grace, to bless the food. He picks up the bread, and he gives thanks for it, and he breaks it, and he gives it, and then it says, 'Their eyes were opened, and they recognised him.'

It's like in that moment, the risen Lord revealing himself in bread and wine is reversing the sin of Adam and Eve, that he's restoring that self-image, that knowledge that they are loved by God, that they are forgiven, that they are part of the family of God, that they are part of his good creation, and that they're being set free to begin again. That's what we celebrate every time we celebrate Holy Communion - that our eyes may be opened through the things that we eat as we receive the body and blood of Jesus himself. So he comes to us afresh with all his grace and mercy and enables us to begin again as his new creation.

Reading Text

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

2:15 The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. 16 And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

3:1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" 2 The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 3 but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.' " 4 But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; 5 for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." 6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. 7 Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.