

First Sunday of Lent, 1st March 2020

Lent 1 – Rom.5:12-19; Matt. 4:-11

Original Sin, and the New Adam

Some of you might be able to remember all the way back to June 1997, when Tony Blair seemed like a bright young thing, and the Labour Party swept to power, and even the people who hadn't voted for them seemed cheerful enough about it, and the dawn seemed full of hope and promise.

Do you remember what the song was? What pop song Labour had playing at all their campaign stops, all their rallies, and at the victory party?

It was called 'Things Can Only Get Better'.

'Things can only get better.'

Now, we can debate what people think of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown later. Whether things *did* actually get better.

But the reason I mention it this morning is because that phrase, 'things can only get better' stands for a lot more than one been and gone election campaign. It stands for a whole way of approaching not just politics, but *life*. It is all about confidence and optimism and hope, the sense that things *are* getting better – that we're becoming a more tolerant, more advanced, kinder, wiser, more equal society. If we can only cast off all old prejudices and restrictions and let people be themselves, their basic goodness will shine through. We might not quite build the Kingdom of God on earth, but we will make progress – things will get better.

That has been the basic belief of much of Western Europe for about the last three hundred years, especially since the French Revolution. That Revolution said that the basic problem in human life is terrible social organisation – kings and rich people and churches making the laws. Cast all that off, and liberty, equality, and friendship will flower.

And one reason the Revolution despised the Christian faith – and there were lots of other reasons by the way, many of them quite valid - is that Christianity said 'no'. It's not as simple as that. Cast off the chains, and you won't get all the good things you think: you'll get rivers of blood from the guillotine; you'll get savagery and chaos and disaster. Things can't only get better: they could stay the same or get a good deal worse. Because, Christianity said, you're not dealing with fundamentally good people who are just held back by bad structures. You're dealing with people who are *at least* as fundamentally bad as they are good. You're dealing with people – each one of us - who've gone wrong in the very depths of their lives. You're dealing, in short, with those infected by what we used to call original sin – which was, incidentally, what our first reading from St. Paul today in Romans 5 was all about. 'One man's trespass – Adam's trespass – led to condemnation for all,' says Paul. By the one man's disobedience, many were made sinners and death reigned over them.

Now the doctrine of original sin has had a very bad press in the last three hundred years. It is deeply unfashionable to believe in it. One reason for that is because people will say, 'look, science has shown us that there were no such people as Adam and Eve anyway... you can't really believe there was a tree in a garden and a talking snake and because of *that* we're all terrible sinners, can you?' The answer to which, by the way, is that people who say that really don't know what they're talking about. Very few Christians take the Adam and Eve story as being about two actual historical individual people. We don't think the first few chapters of Genesis are *history*. No, they're like a painting or a poem or even a novel. They still tell the *truth*, absolutely, but a rather different kind of truth than just history. And the truth they tell is that in every man and every woman – and incidentally, that's what the names Adam and Eve mean: man and woman – that in every one of us, something has gone deep down and catastrophically wrong. That we've stepped out of relationship with God, we've tried to grab what was not ours, and that grabbing has spoiled everything: our lives, our relationships, our planet.

And this is what Paul is trying to bring out in his letter to the Romans. I don't know if he thought there was an actual person called Adam with an apple or not – maybe he did – but the more important thing he was trying to say was that what happened in the story happened in each one of us. And that it didn't happen just because as a matter of fact all of us sooner or later did our own grabbing, though we do: it was more as if the power of grabbing had been set loose in us before our choosing really came into it or not. The impulse to grab, to seize, was there in us from the beginning. It's like a spiritual parallel to something we're quite familiar with in the physical world: a child born into a world full of toxic fumes has some pollution in their system from the very beginning, even inside the womb. There's no absolutely pure place in a dirty world. And so it is with things spiritual: the power of grabbing is at work always and everywhere. We will always want to seize what is not ours, to fight, to conquer. Which is why Christianity said to the French Revolution: 'be careful'. It's not just the structures that have gone wrong. Kings and aristocracies are not the real problem: the real problem is the shared human heart, and its deep gone wrong-ness. Can your revolution touch that? Or is your brave new world going to end up looking like very much like the old one?

Which is not to say that we shouldn't hope, or that this world as it is fine, or that all the existing structures of society are good and should be left alone. Absolutely not. Indeed, Christian hope is *more* radical than any revolution – *radical* in the proper sense of the word, going right down to the *radix*, the root. Where is the root of the problem, says the Gospel? In the shared human heart. So where is the solution? In the changing of that heart. In the placing inside it of a different life, a different energy. There must be a New Adam, a new moment, a new deed, when the race can be set on a new course. Someone must let loose a new spirit within us, a spirit which is the opposite of grabbing, a spirit of love. And the Bible says that that New Adam was named Jesus of Nazareth.

That's the meaning of today's Gospel reading. Three times, Jesus is offered the possibility of grabbing – of using his power for his own comfort, his own glory. Three times, he is offered the chance to choose some other than path than love, sacrifice, crucifixion. Each time, he is steady. He goes on, giving Himself away. He does what his Father wants; He refuses to step out of love for God, whatever the cost. He shows that human beings do not have to grab and seize. It may be universal, but it is not essential, it is not what we *are*. It is human being gone wrong, and He is here to show us human being gone right.

And then the most dramatic claim of the Gospel: he is here not just to *show us* human being done right, but to make us right. Think how John's Gospel ends, with the risen Christ breathing his Spirit into the disciples – that's a beautiful picture for what the whole New Testament teaches. Jesus Christ is not just an example, just like Adam was not just an example. He is a power, streaming into us, living in us, changing our course, determining our destiny. For just as by Adam's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience, many will be made righteous. Jesus Christ is the new centre of history, a centre of even more depth and power than Adam. He drives out the spirit of Adam, the spirit of grabbing, and puts a new spirit, a new heart within us. That is the deepest meaning of what we do every Sunday, when we eat and drink the bread and the wine: we take his life deep within us, and He makes us His own.

Things will indeed get better. Not because we elect the right government, or change a few rules. No, things will get better – incomparably, wonderfully, eternally better, filled with joy and goodness and beauty beyond imagining – because the New Adam has come, and He is stronger, deeper, more powerful than the old. Things will get better because one day He will fill all things with his Spirit. Grabbing will be a thing of the past. Service, sacrifice, love will run through all things. They will be as they were meant to be. We will be as we were meant to be. And all because of one thing only: Jesus Christ, the new Adam, to whom be all glory and dominion now and forever. Amen.