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Reading Genesis 3 : 1 - 24

Sermon: 31 January 2010

Rev Dr Richard Anderson

ROB HARROP of Manchester, a computer programmer, founded his own company at nineteen and quickly succeeded. He used his wealth in drinking and partying. Impressed by the life of a Christian colleague, Rob dismissed the challenge and says now, "I didn't want to be locked into all those strict rules and having to give all the good stuff up."

An atheist, Howard Jacobson, writing in last week's Radio Times, says "Atheists rail against the authoritarian nature of religion - all those shalt and shalt nots roared from the mountain top. " He quotes (disapprovingly) Richard Dawkins' rewrite (in the God Delusion) of the ten commandments in which "Thou shalt not commit adultery becomes enjoy your own sex life (so long as it damages nobody else) and leave others to enjoy theirs in private whatever their inclinations, which are none of your business." Many people today shy away from faith in Jesus because they see it as a strait jacket; they want autonomy,,: And maybe it's not only modern people who think like this! Can't we all remember times when we have wanted to kick over the traces? In fact the temptation is as old as the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve wanted freedom to decide their own actions. Why heed God's command? Why restrict their own development? Why not partake of this delicious-looking fruit?

Genesis 3 is the story of freedom - freedom limited, freedom lost and, finally, true freedom found.

FREEDOM LIMITED

Genesis begins with a story of beauty and order. Seven times we read of creation, "it was good" and finally in ch 1:32 "God saw all that he had made and it was very good." We read Adam's expression of wonder when he first set eyes on Eve, followed by a picture of marital harmony and loving unity. "In the cool of the day" God walked with his friends in a wonderful comradeship. God made man in His own image so that we might have a loving relationship with himself..

God gave Adam and Eve all they needed including "trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food (2:9). In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." With wonderful generosity God allowed them to eat of every one of them but one. "When you eat of it", He said, "you will surely die" .In the midst of their glorious freedom God placed just one prohibition, He could have made man an automaton but he desired people who so delighted in Him and all His works as to submit to this one restraint. Adam and Eve would only be truly free by having the possibility of disobedience and rejecting it. By submitting to God's command they could grow in their loving relationship with Him. That relationship depends upon our humble acceptance of creaturely dependence on Him.

A fish is wonderfully free to swim wherever it pleases. For it to attempt to live on land would be a denial of its natural design and meaning. Not only freedom but its very life depends on submitting to the Creator's design. For man to cross the boundary set by his Creator led to inevitable disaster.

To do what God desires merely because one cannot do otherwise has no moral worth. Moral behaviour worthy of God must be freely given and maintained even when the possibility of doing otherwise offers itself. When God had given Eve so much, could she not love Him enough to submit? Could she not trust Him to deny her nothing she needed?

God still gives us the same choice. "If you love me, you will obey me", says Jesus. That takes disciplined self-denial and none of us find that easy. But the result is freedom - freedom to love God more, freedom to grow in His grace. As a parent concerned for the development of a child, so our loving Father disciplines us with His gracious law for our good. GOD LIMITS US TO FREE US TO LOVE HIM MORE.

Watch a skilled pianist on the TV. Marvel at the ease with which her fingers dance over the keys. See the rapture on her face as she makes this wonderful music. How do those fingers obtain such freedom? Every day in life she denies herself many other activities she would enjoy so that she can spend hours practicing.

FREEDOM LOST

Last week channel 4 ran a documentary, "The slumdog children of Mumbai". Four lovely children told us about their lives. All four talked with childish simplicity, even humour sometimes. We saw something of the beauty of childhood created in the image of God. But it is an ugly film. We watched them running around the filthy alleys and plunging into a canal infected with filthy waste from a multitude of closely-packed shacks. A little girl, deserted by her mother, risked her life darting around traffic in an effort to sell a few flowers and rejoiced if she went home to her granny with the equivalent of forty pence in her hand. A boy, abandoned by both parents lived on the streets with a gang whose leader abused him sexually - the nearest he had ever known to love. Twins sentenced to poverty by a drunken father spent their days searching for food in heaps of garbage. We admired them, loved them and felt anger at the cruelty of their lives and the hopelessness of their futures, What has ravaged God's wonderful handiwork?

Eve could help us understand. In the midst of her freedom to enjoy every aspect of the garden, she wanted more. the serpent's suggestion awoke a desire. Here is something beautiful, tasty and life-building; it cannot possibly harm me! It looks so normal: just a piece of fruit! Along with the desire came a doubt about God. Is He denying me something I really need to make me more god-like myself? Can He even be selfish in setting this limit? "When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband who was with her and he ate it."

SIN SPOILS OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD Did she and Adam die? It depends what we mean by death. Instead of the uninhibited delight in each other's body, they felt shame. Worse, their guilt forced them to hide from God. They opened a door to the lifelong enmity of Satan, a hatred which would spread to the whole human race (3:15). They would experience pain, marital disharmony (3:16), toil, and eventually physical death. Most tragic of all, they would be expelled from the beautiful garden with all its freedom and joyful communion with God.

SIN RUINS SOCIETY AND ROBBS US OF FREEDOM. In his "Paradise Lost" Milton sang of "the fruit of that forbidden tree which brought death into the world and all our woes."

Here is the wound that scars the slum children of Mumbai. This fatal rebellion gave rise to suicide bombers, paedophiles, perverts, addicts, drunkards, adulterers, swindling bankers, power-hungry politicians. The Apostle Paul traces all the sins that trouble our world back to this source. In Romans 5:12 he tells us, .."sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned."

All temptation can seem so trivial. This desire hotly invading my mind, this comment forcing its way onto my lips, this act which God's Word forbids - they are all so normal. Doesn't everyone do it? Won't I be a maturer person - more grown up, wiser and stronger - if I consent? So we follow Eve and forget the desperate reality of a world which has rebelled against God and faces all the tragic consequences.

FREEDOM FOUND

But God will not abandon His disobedient children! See how graciously He hides their shame by providing clothes. But He does much more.

FAITH IN JESUS SETS US FREE. God speaks to the serpent about the woman's offspring, "He will crush your head and you will strike his heel." (3:15) The writer to the Hebrews applies this to the Lord Jesus. In Hebrews 2:14/15 he writes, "Jesus shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death - that is the devil - and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."

By faith in Jesus we gain deliverance from both spiritual and physical death, finding a new freedom from all our woes : guilt, the power of sin, bondage to Satan and the fear of death. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:22, "As in Adam all die; so in Christ all will be made alive."

FAITH IN JESUS GIVES US LIFE. Freedom in Christ reverses the tragic sentence in Genesis 3:22, "The man .. must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat and live for ever." What is the significance of the "tree of life"? Jesus tells us that eternal life is to know His Father as well as Jesus Himself in a loving relationship which we lost in the garden. In the last book of the Bible, John writes of this tree, "On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations."

Adam's sin closed access to the tree of life; then Jesus, by His death, opened the way to it. We cannot choose whether or not we will inherit death from Adam but God now gives us total freedom to reach out and eat from the tree of life. How? By coming to Jesus for forgiveness and believing that He died and rose again to give you life.

Eventually Rob Harrop asked Jesus to deliver him from his evil ways and began to model his life on the Bible. Faith and obedience to the Lord became his delight. He lost interest in the endless partying, married his partner Sally, overcame an evil temper and abandoned some ruthless habits in his work . The law of the Lord, which once seemed so restrictive, gave him freedom.

Amen

Readings for the week

I Corinthians 13

Paul is writing to a Christian community that is disordered and divided. In particular, some of the congregation seem to think that they have nothing more to learn or to receive. They think themselves so strong in their faith and wise in their judgements that Paul can say to them, 'Already you have all you want' And with heavy irony he adds, 'Quite apart from us you have become kings' (4.8). The 'apart from us' is at the heart of the matter. They have missed the point that at the Lord's Supper they must wait not only for the Lord 'until he comes' but also for 'those who have nothing' (11.17-33). They are not a few 'kings' who already reign. Resurrection lies ahead, and all will be made alive in Christ' (15.22). In the middle of all this comes Paul's testimony to the supreme value of love as a way of life. The very things that they think set them apart will pass away, including the tongues they associate with their special status. It is love that is the way of Christ, who died for the weak (8.1-1). Those who love are known by God (8.3), and 'love never ends' because, in the end, God will be 'all in all' (15.28).

Other readings: Jeremiah 1.4-10; Psalm 71.1-6; Luke 4.21-30

Prayer

Wherever you need me
may your Spirit lead me.

May I be your signpost
to friend and to stranger,
and you be my shield,
my power against danger.

Wherever you need me
may your Spirit lead me.

Amen.