

Hymns: 433 “Cut of the depths I cry to thee”
 562 “O God, what offering shall I give”
 498 “God of all power, and truth, and grace”
 561 “Now I have found the ground wherein”

Readings: Exodus 24:12-18
 Mark 12:28-34

“SIN AND DEATH”

Well, we’ve entered Lent and, as usual, some mighty and solemn themes emerge for consideration. This Sunday is a couple of days later than the anniversary of the death of John Wesley and this year sees the 500th anniversary commemoration of the opening blast of the Protestant Reformation. That explains the hymns we are singing today as well as the themes that we’re exploring.

The longest and most sustained piece of work ever written by John Wesley was published in 1757. Several hundred pages were devoted to the “Doctrine of Original Sin”. I’ve always been wary of this subject. It’s linked to the opening chapters of the bible - the garden of Eden, the temptation of Adam, the fall of human kind after he’d eaten the fruit of the forbidden tree. It’s a picture whose historicity has long since been disproved. And yet it haunts my mind. It’s a picture whose dynamic remains as fresh now as it ever could have been.

Indeed, in my old age, I find myself more and more unable to push it away from me. Just take three examples where the fundamental dynamic of the creation story has been, is being) re-enacted in our own day.

Let’s take the internet first and the social media which have proliferated as a result of that signal innovation. We’ve seen the free flow of knowledge and open access to learning. The internet has helped to develop relationships, to open doors of possibility, to increase levels of self-awareness. It has improved communication beyond imagining. It has become an essential tool for the organisation of our affairs. In all these ways, we can only salute this magnificent invention.

And yet. And yet, we cannot remain unaware of the dark areas of cyberspace. We are currently concerned about people’s privacy being invaded, their security being hacked into, sensitive business information leaked to the general public. And parents can never forget the easy availability of pornography as it floods across cyberspace.

All of this begs the question – why can’t we enjoy the blessings of the internet without seeking to turn them into curses? Why must we always want to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree?

And then there's the question of human rights – the fruits of the Enlightenment. The last 250 years have been dominated by the struggle for equality for all regardless of race or religion, gender or sexual orientation, class or circumstance. We've sought a level playing field in the workplace, in our communities, and even in our domestic space. Surely a wonderful development. Who could possibly complain?

And yet. And yet, once those rights have been established in law, we've seen a new spirit coming into play. Claiming those "rights", we've seen an army of lawyers fighting battles to seek "compensation" for the supposed infringement of those rights. A veritable spirit of litigation has been born.

Once again, we can only applaud the general direction of travel. And yet we must ask ourselves serious questions about the exploitation and the turning-to-advantage of these very rights by unscrupulous people in search of personal profit.

And then, a final example, there's the way we use our planet. Who can deny its beauty? Or the abundance of its provision? Or the intricacy with which it has come into being? We know we depend upon our planet. We marvel at its ability to offer us aesthetic, nourishment, and prospective benefits.

And yet. And yet, we have plenty of evidence of the way the created order is being violated, wildlife destroyed, the future of humankind threatened. Climate change and air pollution are constantly in the news – evidence of the way we greedily exploit the resources of the earth.

Why do we want more than is good for us? Why can't we see the folly of our ways? The garden of Eden certainly models this picture and nobody can say we haven't been made aware of it.

I could go on and on by mentioning the plight of refugees at large and the homeless on our streets; or the maltreatment of the elderly and the unavailability of social care; and the demonising of immigrants. We simply don't seem to have learned any lessons at all.

St Paul seems to be right. Sin entered the world and dominates our inter-active lives. Sin is grafted into human experience, hard-wired into human nature. And it's time people like me, someone proud to be called "liberal", were braver in talking about sin, naming it, looking it in the eye. Sin is the elephant in the room for liberal preachers like me. And it's time we opened our eyes.

According to St Paul, Sin brings Death along with it. Not death in the merely physical sense – the cessation of breathing, the end of our days, our meeting with the Grim Reaper. Not death in that sense but in the sense of meaninglessness and mindlessness, emptiness of purpose, boredom, enslavement to forces beyond our control, pointlessness and despair. Death can be met on all these fronts – the death of the soul.

But Paul is equally clear that this is not what we were made for. He berates us for seeming to want to sign up for membership of the Gadarene swine as they dash

towards the cliff edge. He regrets that we seem driven by nature or culture to exercise our “freedoms” in ways that are so often fateful
Paul is in no doubt that he knows a way through this self-inflicted mess. At this stage let me quote in its entirety a little hymn by Charles Wesley on this very subject.

*Jesus the First and Last,
On you my soul is cast:
You did your work begin
By blotting out my sin;
You will the root remove,
And perfect me in love.*

*Yet when the work is done
The work is but begun:
Partaker of your grace,
I long to see your face;
The first I prove below,
The last I die to know*

This is a root and branch solution. It deals not only with those “sins” – our infraction against common sense or the common interest, our selfishness, our self-indulgence. It goes much further and deeper than that. It goes to the root of the matter and rids us of the underlying condition which breeds those sins. Sin (with a capital S) is the state of our soul, the breeding ground for those sins (small s) that we regret so much.

Paul offers grace abounding, justification on the basis of faith, an ability to deal with the awesome threat of “law”, the overthrow of death, and life, life in all its fullness.

And it is the “second Adam”, Jesus Christ, who offers the secret formula that can achieve these extraordinary outcomes.

Yes Jesus, the same Jesus, who faced down his demons in the desert (as we read earlier in the service). The demons there were summed up in the name “Satan”. For Paul, he prefers to call them Sin and Death. Jesus is invited to take shortcuts towards making the most of his extraordinary powers. His inner voices as well as his biological needs must have been clamouring for some such outcomes. But he resists resolutely. If he’s to defeat Sin and Death, he must not give them one inch in his struggle with them. And so here are his replies:

- One does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.
- Again it is written: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test”.
- Away with you Satan! For it is written “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”

Oh that Jesus had the availability of a Twitter account. These three messages count 66, 46 and 66 characters. What an answer to the Tweeters of this world and what an antidote to their poison.

500 years ago, Martin Luther nailed his 95 thesis to Wittenberg Cathedral. They proclaimed that a pardon from sin could never be bought with a piece of paper signed by the Pope. Such “indulgences”, even coming from someone who claimed to be infallible, had no power to save us. It’s only through faith and by grace that we can be released from our servitude to Sin and Death he argued.

Luther’s Lectures on the Epistle to the Romans have become recognised as a foundational document in the understanding of the Christian faith. These days, the

Roman Catholic Church too stands in full recognition of the brilliance of Luther's insights. Faith is what wins the day, Trust in the God who revealed himself in Christ. Never again can we turn the advantages of faith into a marketable commodity.

It is my prayer that our Communion today might be a reaffirmation of our faith in the one who not only saw off the devil at the beginning of his ministry but went on doing so till the end. No shortcuts for him. No escape routes. No smoke and mirrors. Just a life lived to the very end on the basis of love.

Love is the perfect antidote to sin. It offers the perfect release from our chains. It opens up the perfect road to life in all its fullness.

Poor old Sin.

Poor old Death.

They can't stop the life force released by the death of Jesus. The cross stands triumphant over both of them. And it offers us, in our day, hope.

Amen