

**A Sermon for the first Sunday in Lent.
26 Feb 2023
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Genesis 2: 15-17 and 3: 1-7

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 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.'

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"?' The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 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."' But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' 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. 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.

Sermon

I asked our 15-year-old son to work in our garden; to mow the lawn.
"You are free to go everywhere the garden and cut till your heart's content".
"But, don't take the mower, in your bare feet, down the root-riddled, rutted, stinging-nettle strewn path that leads to the compost heap. On that day, there will be no end of trouble."

Our son was given some work, freedoms and a boundary.
I won't get into what happened...
The point is that these three things; work, freedom, boundary, were at play.

Let's take a look at our reading from Genesis 2 and 3.

In 2:15 we read; *'The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.'*

God is directing the action.

God takes the man and puts him into a garden that God has planted.

God gives the man work to do, *'to till the garden and keep it'*.

So, right at the beginning, humans are given a **vocation**, which we know is a good thing, because in chapter one (v31) we're told that, *'God saw everything that he had made and it was very good'*.

The man is to work in the garden God has planted and in which the man has been placed.

Our first take-away point: Work *belongs* in the garden. To have a *vocation*; to work, is a good, God-given gift to human beings.

I don't necessarily mean a paid job.

Rather, life includes the gift of meaningful things to get on with.

As one of my tutors at art college put it, *'there are endless, endless things to do.'*

Reading on...

In chapter **2:16**, we hear; *'And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden'*

After putting the man in the garden and giving him a **vocation**, God gives him **permission**. The man is *free* to eat of every tree in the garden!

Our second take-away point is that, Freedom *belongs* in the garden. To be free to eat and enjoy variety is a good, God-given gift to human beings.

Reading on again,

In chapter **2:17** we hear, *'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.'*

After vocation and permission, there is a **prohibition**.

Nothing is explained.

We are not told *why* this tree is in the garden or what it or its fruit look like.

What matters is,

- The *fact* of the prohibition
- The *authority* of God
- God's unqualified *expectation of obedience*

Our third take-away point is that, Boundaries *belong* in the garden.

God's prohibition of some things and the expectation of obedience is a good, God-given gift to human beings.

Please note, I am *not* saying *what* I imagine the boundaries are.

I am pointing out that the passage helps us to understand that boundaries are part of God's purpose for human beings.

There are boundaries in every human relationship; each interaction and task.

If we take v15-17 together, we might say that before God, human beings are *characterised* by vocation, permission, and prohibition.

In other words, God's good purpose for us includes the gifts of **work**, which provides purpose and fulfilment; the freedom to be physically **sustained** and to enjoy variety in this; and **boundaries**, meaning that some things – even things that might apparently meet our needs and desires – are off limits and to be left alone.

If this is right, finding a way to hold these three facets of God's purpose together in a good, life-giving whole should be quite a serious priority for us:

Vocation. Permission. Prohibition.

Each only makes sense in relation to the other two.

Q: What happens if you remove one and leave only two?

What if we *only* have vocation and permission?

IOW, work and freedom without boundaries.

What if we *only* have vocation and prohibition?

IOW, work in a world of restrictive boundaries.

What if we *only* have permission and prohibition?

IOW, the notion of absolute freedom alongside a growing litany of things you *mustn't* think, say or do. And no task, purpose or meaningful things to work at

Lets hold on to this idea that 'vocation, permission and prohibition' are a gift of God as a package. We'll come back to think about how this is good news.

But first, the lectionary moves us to the **beginning of chapter 3**

3:1 *'The serpent said to the woman, 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden"?''*

What do we notice? ...that, in fact, God said no such thing.

What he said in v.16 was, *'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden'*

The woman responds to the serpent's question (**3:2-3**) *'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 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.'"*

The woman corrects the serpent. But it's too late. A new notion is already in play.

3:4 *'The serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.'*

Notice the prohibition God gave, which seemed to be a given, is now being scrutinised as if it wasn't a given but an **option**.

And notice too, that the serpent **treats God as a third person**; not part of the discussion but the object of it.

This isn't talking *to* God or *with* God but **about God**.

God is objectified. And the serpent seems knowing and critical about God.

There is actually some theology being done here. But it's not in the service of God or God's purposes. Theology is being done here *in the place* of obedience!

In 2:17 death is mentioned by God, but it's not the main point. When God mentions death it isn't a threat but an acknowledgement that there's a boundary to life.

Now we see the boundary altered by the serpent to *become* a threat. The serpent's words transform death into a terror and makes the humans question everything they thought they knew. It's not God who makes death the main agenda item, it's the serpent.

Here's what we really need to notice:
The subtle theological talk engaged in by the serpent is **a distortion of the realities**.

In 3:1 the serpent grossly misrepresents God, saying back God's speech with just enough of a twist to miss the point.

The woman corrects the serpent in v2&3 but by then the mis-quoting has introduced the idea of an alternative to God's way.

And so we read, **3:6-7** '*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. 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.*'

The human beings, created in God's own image take the prohibited fruit and eat it.

God's prohibition is violated (2:17)

God's permission to eat freely is perverted (2:16)

The vocation to fruitful work (2:15) is now neglected

There is no more mention of 'tilling and keeping'. The interest of the two now focuses completely on themselves.

Overcome with shame, they use some of the leaves of the garden(!) to make loincloths to cover their nakedness and they set about hiding from the presence of the Lord among the trees of the garden(!) which had been intended as a place of good purpose and freedom.

What a mess!

So, where is the good news in this story?

Where is the good news for those outside the church? For those who feel confused or anxious? For warring nations?

Where is the good news for the Church. For each of us?

It is in the trio of 'vocation, permission and prohibition' given by God at the beginning.

The gift is in these three held together, each making sense of the others.

For those who wonder whether there's any purpose or point, God says, *"I have created you and given you a vocation. You do have a purpose and there are things to get on with. There is meaning to be found and fulfilment"*

This isn't necessarily in paid work. It's in knowing that we are made to get on with things. Tasks, large and small, are not a burden to be escaped but a gift to be enjoyed.

This gift is linked to the next one, **Freedom**.

To those wrestling with anxiety and fear, God says, *'I have given you freedoms and variety to enjoy. Life can be filled with exploration and adventure.'*

This doesn't mean we have to travel the world or tick 100 items off a bucket list. It can mean the freedom to enjoy the simple, everyday habits and rhythms that sustain us.

And these two are linked to the third, **Boundaries**.

To those who feel overwhelmed and paralysed by the myth of absolute freedom, God's good news is, *'There are edges and limits.* Boundaries are a God-given part of reality. Life and health and peace are found as we seek to live within them.

Vocation. Permission. Prohibition.

Held together, these are God's good gift to us – to people everywhere. There *is* a good creator. And we can know him in Jesus God has made us and given us life in this place at this time. God gives us a vocation, freedoms and boundaries. God has in mind what Jesus called, *life in all its fulness.*

Jesus showed us how to live well within the tension of these three gifts.

- He got on with the tasks of life and ministry
- He exercised his freedom as a fully-human being.
- And** he was careful to observe God-given boundaries; living and dying without sin so that those who put their trust in him might inherit eternal life.

As the Holy Spirit helps us to hold these three things in tension, we will find freedom for ourselves and something good, hopeful and lifegiving to share with those around us.

Let's pray.

Gracious God,

We thank and praise you
For the gifts of vocation, permission and prohibition.

Help us to understand what these mean for us
as we seek to live faithfully this Lent.

Fill our hearts with love for you
and drive out all our fear,
for this we ask in Jesus' name

Amen