

## First Sunday of Lent, Matins

Genesis 2: 15-17, 3:1-7 and Romans 5: 12-19

Father Tim Carroll

Who is the greatest?

Mohamed Ali liked to make out at that he was, but there's case for Rocky Marciano, Joe Lewis or Smokin Joe Fraser. Chris Eubank? Maybe a Matins crowd likes to keep their debates strictly around who is the greatest composer Beethoven, Bach, Mozart. I'm sure our Director of Music and distinguished choir have spent many a night brooding and arguing, glass of whiskey in hand about such weighty matters. Whereas I like to stick to debates around the likes of Diego Maradona, Pele, Lionel Messi... George Best.

Listening to our Romans reading you may be weighing up the stronger candidate of Adam v Jesus Christ. Does Adam's/humanity's sin or Christ grace have the last word about how I live my life? Who is the stronger? Who will come out on top in defining human nature? What is the greatest force in the world?

As we begin our lent season it is impossible to get away from the subject of sin. The time which we often like to think about self-improvement, even punishment, an opportunity to strip back those habits we think of as harmful. It is right to examine ourselves at this time with prayer, scripture reading, confession or fasting, All these practices can help us come to terms with the sin that so easily entangles. To use a football analogy (it is a game of two halves) we don't stay turned inward. Like in a football game you change ends – you face the other way after the second half – where we turn to the whole point of Lent: Jesus Christ. We are not to stay turned inwards, self indulgently licking our wounds. The the whole point of Lent is to get to a place where are a deeper relationship with Christ and to realise that he is to be the centre of our lives, not our own selfish and greedy tendencies.

Our Genesis and Romans readings can be heavy going and may leave you wondering what is exactly is sin and how does it effect my life? In our story of Genesis, Adam and Eve disobey God by eating from the tree of good and evil, which results in God banishing them from the Garden of Eden to work the ground. The interpretation of this story has had a profound effect on Western Christianity's understanding of what it means to be human. Early Christian theologian St Augustine of Hippo's interpretation of Genesis and Romans was that because of the sin of Adam and Eve disobeying God it has enslaved all of mankind to the power of sin. For Augustine human beings are sinful from birth, from conception they are fallen

A variation of understanding this idea of sin is relational and describes a network of vertical and horizontal relationships. Humans are called to represent creation to God and God to creation: humans are brought into existence, from nothing, to be orientated in vertical relationship with God, who is creator and redeemer. Humans have a direct link to God through the grace of Jesus Christ. This directedness of Christ through the Father orients humans in the image of God. The fall of humanity has distorted the image of God and our relationship has becoming misdirected. Humans distorted relationship to God leads to a distorted relationship with other humans and creation. As humanity has lost its vertical directedness to God human 'self-divination' has taken its place.

Humans try to take on the attributes of God and fail to do so, which lead to the selfishness, lust, greed, and exploitation in the world.

This is similar to a liberation theology interpretation of sin, where the emphasis is on how external structures effect our behaviour and salvation comes in changing society. It also emphasises isolation as sin, how when we turn away from God we turn away from our neighbour, thus leading to selfish and inhumane acts.

A different perspective comes from medieval mystics, who upheld that God and human beings were not alienated from each other through the idea of original sin. Mystics such Julian of Norwich and Meister Eckhart take a more positive interpretation. The idea that the image of God is the '*ground of the soul*' and that humans are bound to God through nature puts a different spin on what it means to be in the image of God. For the mystics being redeemed is not about restoration of the image of God, but reclaiming what human identity is in the image of God.

Whatever stance you take, there is much more to look into when we read in Genesis and Romans, and we hear of Adam and Eve hiding from God in the garden, and this seeming parallel context in Romans between Adam and Christ – the power of sin vs the power of grace.

We are encouraged to examine sin during lent, but not let it dominant us in a self-indulgent fashion. We should not be too fixated on ourselves. But actually this shouldn't be a contest. Ironically, when we overly fixate on ourselves we actually fall into the sin of vanity and pride. And we fail to recognise that Christ is supreme or that Christ is superior to humanity's sin. Because Humanity's sin is human, whereas grace comes from the heart of an infinite, sovereign God, the source and ruler of all things. The difference between the grace of God and humanity's sin is radical. Paul does not leave it as an open question or ambiguous. He says in Romans '*the nor can the gift of God be compared with the result of one man's sin*'. Don't fall into trap this lent by believing sin to have much power in your life and by doing so miss out on the liberating grace of Jesus Christ who journeys with us this lent. Sin counts less than the righteousness of Christ. It is not a case of power against power but our powerlessness against God's power. In Romans, sin and grace are parallel with each other but according to Paul sin is not comparable to the grace of God.

The result of grace is not measured by the result of sin. Sin is an intruder into the scheme of God's original blessing, but the rule of God's love and grace overflows in our lives, breaking the power of sin and isolation. So this morning we are invited to begin lent by examining the sin that we internalise, but through our Lenten practice we turn our eyes to Christ.

As we hear in Genesis before he sets up the tree of knowledge, God sets up another tree, the tree of life. If the tree of knowledge is where humanity fell the tree of life becomes the place where humanity was raised to life. This is what the cross of Jesus does: it turns the tree of knowledge into the tree of life. Lent may *begin* with the tree of knowledge, but it *ends* with the tree of life.