

## Week 3 - The Mystery of Sin, Suffering and Hope

### Readings

- Isaiah 55.1-9
- Psalm 63.1-9
- 1 Corinthians 10.1-13
- Luke 13. 1-9

### Starting out - The mystery of sin

*Of Mans First Disobedience, and the Fruit  
Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste  
Brought Death into the World, and all our woe,  
With loss of Eden ...*

John Milton  
*Paradise Lost*

So begins John Milton's famous poem *Paradise Lost*. His subject is that extraordinary mystery, the broken relationship between human beings and the loving creator God.

We first get our understanding of sin from the book of Genesis, where we are told of the first disobedience in the Garden of Eden. God offers the first humans, Adam and Eve, everything they desire from the garden, but not fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But Adam and Eve stop listening to God and listen instead to the voice of temptation, putting what they want before God's desire for them. Once they take the fruit from the tree the relationship of trust and love with God is broken, they know they have broken away from God and they can no longer live as before in the beautiful world of God's intention.

So this story asks us: do we recognise ourselves here? If we think about ourselves as humans we can identify with Adam and Eve after the 'Fall'; we are creatures who easily follow our own desires and ignore our conscience:

*'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us'*

(1 John 1:8).

But sometimes we ignore the continuing story of the Book of Genesis. The wonderful mystery is that God goes with Adam and Eve and guides them and their descendants in their struggles and on their journey through history. God never abandons them. And in this is a tremendous hope. In the readings today we hear songs of praise and hope amid the disorder and suffering of the world. And where will we ultimately find this hope? That is what we must discover on our continuing Lenten journey with Jesus.

### Something to talk about - Sin, suffering and hope

- Do you agree with this account of sin? How else might we think about the Garden of Eden story? How might the Garden of Eden story have been misused or misunderstood?
- How would you talk with someone who says that a good God would not allow the world to be in the state it is in today?

- Many people today think ‘sin’ is just a word for wrongdoing. How would you explain to them what sin means in a Christian context? Why is sin ‘deadly’?
- What sort of gifts do you think God gives us to make a difference to the pain of the world?

### Some scripture to ponder - The barren fig tree

*Then he told this parable: ‘A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, “See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?” He replied, “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down .”*

(Luke 13.6-9)

One way of interpreting this mysterious parable is that Jesus suggests that God actively comes looking for our spiritual flourishing within the Creation but that we are found wanting. As the gardener, Jesus offers us the way to salvation. If we attend to Jesus we will find the way to bear the fruit God longs for. But if we don’t, we have wasted all that God has invested in us.

### Questions

- Jesus gives a stark message: repent or perish! Why do you think his message is so direct?
- What do you think the ‘fruit’ should be?

### Entering the mystery - God so loved the world

St Ambrose, meditating on the mystery of sin, suffering and hope, thinks about the story of Noah and the Ark to explain how God forgives human sin.

*God, willing to restore what was lacking, sent the flood and bade just Noah go up into the ark. And he, after having, as the flood was passing off, sent forth first a raven which did not return, sent forth a dove which is said to have returned with an olive twig. You see the water, you see the wood [of the ark], you see the dove, and do you hesitate as to the mystery?*

*The water, then, is that in which the flesh is dipped, that all carnal sin may be washed away. All wickedness is there buried. The wood is that on which the Lord Jesus was fastened when He suffered for us. The dove is that in the form of which the Holy Spirit descended, as you have read in the New Testament, Who inspires in you peace of soul and tranquillity of mind. The raven is the figure of sin, which goes forth and does not return, if, in you, too, inwardly and outwardly righteousness be preserved.*

St Ambrose  
*On the Mysteries*

In a startling image, St Ambrose thinks of human sin as the raven which is released from the Ark and does not come back. The world is full of human wickedness which needs to be redeemed. So the story tells of God acting directly to enable human beings to change the world and to be saved. God does not save Noah, Noah has to listen and turn to God to be saved.

For St Ambrose, the water of baptism declares us God's people and the Jesus on the wood of the Cross is our salvation, our safe ark. As the raven of all our sin flies away never to return, the dove of peace comes to us with its olive branch, and the Spirit directs our lives. So the Noah story is one of tremendous hope and promise and full of God's love.

The purpose of the Lenten journey is to come face to face with that mystery of the Cross and to know its relevance for us in a world still damaged by sin and suffering today.

### Questions

- Where do you see stories of hope in the world today?
- What do you make of St Ambrose's meditation on the Noah story?

### Something to pray

*God, our guide and shepherd,*

We wander away from you like lost sheep.  
Sometimes we can't remember  
where we are supposed to go.  
The path gets blurred, we turn aside  
from the places you have made for us  
to keep us safe, to guide us.

Sometimes we end up hurt in a ditch.  
Sometimes we lead others astray.  
Sometimes we simply suffer.

Yet we have hope.  
We know you will come and find us  
You will forgive us our trespasses.  
You will forgive our sins.

*Amen*

We finish by joining together in saying the Lord's Prayer.