

## Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Genesis 3:9-15

Psalm 129

2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

Mark 3:20-35

In our first reading we heard from one of the most well-known texts in human history. The power and impact of the Genesis narrative is striking. So much about the human condition is revealed in just a few short lines. Likewise, so much about the God who made us is also revealed. The mystery of human iniquity, and the subsequent unfolding of salvation history, are all set in place in just a couple of chapters. The narrative is so compact, and so incisive.

Our passage begins with the very first conversation between God and man, in which God asks the man, “Where are you?” I think we can see in this the Lord’s deep desire *to be with us*, even though we so often try to hide from him. Of course, he knows where we are at all times. The question is, do we know where we are? Where we *really* are? I suspect this first question from God to Adam is more for Adam’s benefit than it is for God’s. Where are you? What has become of you? Where have you let yourself end up?

The man replies, “I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid.” The man is hiding from God out of fear and embarrassment – what a terribly sad image! The one who created us from nothing and who sustains in every moment with love beyond all telling – to feel the need to hide from him in shame? Absolutely tragic.

And God responds with a question that I find both beautiful, and heartbreaking: “Who told you that you were naked?” Who told you that you were naked? Think of little toddlers who prance around naked without a care in the world. They have no concept of nakedness, in that they have no concept of other people’s point of view. They are seen and affirmed and loved by their parents (hopefully!), but they have no real capacity to see themselves or the world as someone else sees them.

But once we become aware of how others see things, and as such develop the capacity for shame, the feeling of nakedness is one of the more frightening things we can experience – the vulnerability, the embarrassment, the awareness of our many imperfections. Adam and Eve’s original innocence is shattered by their taking of the fruit, and they essentially invent the offence of indecency in the process.

Of course, their offence was not really about eating some random piece of fruit that was off-limits, but about presuming to be able to decide for themselves questions of good and evil, to become their own arbiter of the moral life. In spite of all that God had provided them, they essentially sought to become their own gods. As a result, death now enters the world, and they experience a loss of the radical intimacy with God they had originally known.

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This concept of Original Sin has a lot of baggage around it in our culture today, and it is seen by many as a very negative idea, as though it meant we humans are rotten to the core. Don't forget, the heart of Genesis 1 & 2 is the affirmation that our original creation is good – indeed, very good. This is in stark contrast to most other ancient creation stories, in which humans emerged from some violent or chaotic event. No, Genesis shows creation taking place out of love in a rational, well-ordered way. And yet, if we're honest with ourselves, we see our own imperfections all too often, especially as we get older – that, as St Paul puts it, we so often do what we don't want to do, as vice versa. In this sense, the understanding of our brokenness that is shown in the teaching on the Fall can just be seen as an accurate description of our reality. Moreover, it is actually freeing to acknowledge this, because it means we don't have to wake up each morning and try to convince ourselves that we're perfect, despite significant evidence to the contrary.

Again, the hereditary nature of all this can seem unfair – after all, we didn't eat the fruit, and yet we're paying for it, as it were. But again, I think this can be seen as just a statement of the reality of things. Consider a couple who move to a new country shortly before the birth of their first child. That child's life is going to be significantly different than it might have been—maybe for the better, maybe not—but the impact is undeniable, and it was complete out of the child's hands. And presuming the child stays in the new country, if they have children they too will be affected by their grandparents' change of country, and so forth. The choice was made long before they were born, and yet it has influenced their lives in a very significant way.

And yet, even here in the third chapter of the first book of the Bible, we are already given the first sign of the Good News to come. Speaking to the serpent, God says, “I will make you enemies of each other: you and the woman, your offspring and her offspring. It will crush your head and you will strike its heel.” This is the first glimmer of salvation, the first little hint of the ultimate victory that would be won by a descendent of Eve over the powers of death.

Moreover, right after this except, God responds to Adam and Eve's nakedness by making clothes for them, to cover up their shame. What a lovely, almost maternal image! To me, it points ahead to when Jesus would take away Peter's shame following his three denials by giving him three chances to say, “I love you”.

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Now, much has been made about Eve's role in the Fall over the centuries, but don't overlook the fact that in the text Adam makes no attempt to dissuade her from taking the fruit for herself, and he likewise makes no attempt to resist the offer of the fruit for himself either. Then, when God calls them out, the man blames the woman, and the woman in turn blames the serpent. Our fallen human condition in a nutshell! “I

swear, it wasn't my fault!" It's just like school children in the vice-principal's office who have been caught red-handed.

When we stuff up, taking ownership of it is a good start. Indeed, it's a necessary start. Refusing to take responsibility, passing the buck – this is recipe for nothing but further suffering, both for ourselves and others. In this sense, it is self-righteousness that is really the unforgiveable sin, for it not only represents a refusal to acknowledge wrong and seek forgiveness, it means that the hurts we cause continue to reverberate around the world unforgiven.

This leads us to the Gospel, where we heard an enigmatic statement from Jesus: "I tell you solemnly, all men's sins will be forgiven, and all their blasphemies; but let anyone blaspheme against the Holy Spirit and he will never have forgiveness: he is guilty of an eternal sin."

This can strike us as a rather strange thing for Jesus to have said the Gospel, highlighting the utter seriousness of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. To be clear, Jesus is not talking about some particular formulation of words that God takes such offence at that he would hold a grudge for eternity, as though if we take the Lord's name in vain that's forgivable, but taking the Holy Spirit's name in vain means we'll be damned for all eternity. As I've said, we could describe the unforgiveable sin as really being self-righteousness. Why is it unforgivable? Not because it can't be forgiven, but because it *won't* be forgiven.

As I've said a hundred times, love cannot be forced. God's willing forgiveness must be sought and accepted. Self-righteousness is unforgivable because the guilty person does not ask for forgiveness, because they honestly think they have no need of it. It's a bit like a person with cancer refusing to go to the oncologist because they are convinced that nothing is wrong with them. The oncologist cannot treat them, not because they are unwilling to, but simply because the patient will not go into their office. In a similar way, God can forgive any sinner except the one who does not think they are a sinner.

Keep in mind, the Holy Spirit is the divine person of the Blessed Trinity who advocates on our behalf to the Father. He is like our defence lawyer. And so really, what this exhortation refers to is the choice to reject God's grace; it is a rejection of God's offer of salvation, and of the manifold invitations of the Holy Spirit.

As many saints have said, should the door to God ever be permanently shut, it was us who closed it from the inside. The will of a person who could act in this way is so hardened that he doesn't want God's mercy, and rejects his goodness. Such a sin against the Holy Spirit is thus "unforgivable" precisely because it is the sinner himself who keeps God from forgiving him. As God respects the freedom with which he created us, he also respects a sinner's decision to firmly refuse to be forgiven.

This might be more common than you think. A parallel for us might be someone with sins they need to confess refusing or not bothering to go to confession, either because they think they have no need of it, or for some other reason. Those sins are likewise unforgivable, not because God is not willing to forgive them, but because they are never brought to him for forgiveness. We have to ask for it! God doesn't force himself upon us. In this sense, you could argue that the majority of baptised Catholics who almost never seek the sacraments might find themselves in this situation... of their own choosing! They never feel the need for the Lord's grace and thus never seek it out.

Consider the parable of the Prodigal Son. The key movement in the narrative I think is the son turning back to return to his father. The Father overwhelms the Prodigal Son with forgiveness even before he gets most of his apology out... but he had to turn back.

Of course, the Prodigal Son parable is prefaced by two brief introductory parables about finding a lost coin and a lost sheep, in which the protagonist *seeks out* the coin and the sheep. The difference with the lost son is that, unlike a coin or a sheep, the son has free will. The Father *is* seeking him out, but the son could have chosen to be lost indefinitely if he wanted to. Thank goodness he came to his senses. How about us?

We may think, "I haven't committed any serious sins, I'm doing alright." And this may well be true. Any yet, you and I have been made for perfect union with our perfect God for all eternity in heaven. Do you feel ready for that?

None of us can ever claim to have reached perfection. Indeed, as so many of the saints have said, the more they began to grow in virtue, the more they could see just how wide the gulf was between God's perfection and their own state of readiness for it. And so, St Paul says in our second reading, "That is why there is no weakening on our part, and instead, though this outer man of ours may be falling into decay, the inner man is renewed day by day."

We are invited to pursue a gradual growth in virtue, and a gradual softening of our often-hardened hearts, so that we may recognise the ways in which we continue to rebel against God and his guidance of our lives, and thus be prepared ever more for the perfect union with him that we were always made for.