
What is Sin?

Genesis 2.15-17, 3.1-7

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on February 10, 2008 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

When I was six years old I had a best friend called Nicholas. Nicholas was a bit bigger than me, a bit stronger than me, a bit braver than me, and a bit stupider than me. We used to get together to eat French fries. We didn't yet know they were supposed to be called Freedom fries. One year I came home from a vacation at the beach with a huge sea shell. It must have been ten inches long and all curled up. My house had a set of French doors at the front. We didn't yet know they were supposed to be called Freedom doors. Anyhow, Nicholas and I were interested in a different kind of freedom.

Nicholas said to me, "I wonder what it'd sound like if we smashed a whole pane of glass." I looked at the huge sea shell and thought what a satisfying sight it would be to see that shell pass through a large window pane. Not that I had any intention of doing the deed myself. "Go on," I said. And, lo and behold, he did. It made quite sound, and quite a sight ... and quite a mess. Only afterwards did we realize that our actions lacked what the CIA calls "deniability." I, of course, blamed Nicholas, and denied any involvement. Nicholas missed out on pocket money for a month and went to bed with no TV and no treat. I was released from the doghouse without any charge being brought. But I've never since gone along with those who talk about the innocence of children.

What Nicholas and I didn't realize at the time was that we'd reenacted the Adam and Eve story. Genesis chapter 2 tells us that God gave Adam and Eve three Ps – purpose, permission, and prohibition. The *purpose* is to till the garden and keep it. The words aren't really agricultural ones. They mean to *cherish* the garden as a gift from God. Centuries later St Augustine made a very helpful distinction between what we *use* and what we *enjoy*. The things we use are instruments that have a limited life. The things we enjoy are gifts that never run out. So Adam and Eve are to *enjoy* the garden as a gift that will never run out, but not simply to use it. The second p is permission. The *permission* is to eat of every tree in the garden. We've already been told that this garden has every good thing in it you could possibly imagine. This is a fabulous playground. And the third p is prohibition. There's just the one *prohibition* – don't eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Maybe a better translation would be the "tree of the knowledge of everything." Just don't do it. Or, in the jargon of our day, "What part of 'No' don't you understand?"

In short, there's a glorious playground, in which there's a place and role for us, where we have almost unlimited freedom, except one limit which is for our own good. We aren't given unlimited knowledge because the garden runs on something more important than knowledge and that's *trust*. If the man and woman want to know everything they can – but what they'll lose is trust. And most likely they'll come to regret it.

And in Genesis chapter 3 we get a description of four kinds of disorder. One kind of disorder I'm going to call *sin*. Sin is an individual act of disobedience, perpetrated out of either perversity or stupidity. The story gives us a definition of sin – it's the substitution of knowledge and experience for trust and memory. In the eating of the fruit, in the breaking of the only rule in the glorious playground, the man and the woman turned something that was to be enjoyed and cherished into something that was to be possessed and used. We've all done it. The icons of sin are the greed that regards a cream cake as something not to be admired but devoured and the lust that sees a beautiful person not as a potential friend or respected stranger but as an instrument of sexual acquisitiveness or a tool for frustrated desire. But these are only icons. In practice we sin whenever we use what we should enjoy, whenever we demand to know and experience and possess rather than be happy to trust and remember and cherish, whenever we grab and cling instead of receiving and offering, whenever we hoard to ourselves what there should be plenty of for everybody, whenever, in short, we doubt that God in the tree of life has given us enough and proceed to make our own arrangements.

The next kind of disorder I'm going to call evil. Evil is when sin becomes a disease, when what is mean and cruel and distorted becomes acceptable and normal and pervasive. In the story the serpent represents this kind of evil – the evil that turns blessing and trust into scarcity and bitterness. Evil isn't simply sin in a loud voice. Evil is the virus that turns misunderstanding into hatred, turns assertiveness into vindictiveness, turns

concentration into obsession. There's a difference between sin and evil. Sin is when you know you've done wrong and hope you won't get caught; evil is when you've convinced yourself that what you're doing isn't just right, it's noble and worthy. When 5000 people die in an industrial accident that could have been prevented, or when the *Titanic* goes down because its owners and crew were so desperate to break a record they ignored the dangers, we're talking about straightforward sins with catastrophic consequences. But when a whole nation is persuaded that exterminating Jews is a fine and noble thing or when a group of young men prepare to take their own lives and those of thousands of others by flying planes into tall buildings to reassert the dignity of their religion, we're talking about evil, because these people really believed what was horrifying was in fact just and noble. The serpent portrays God as not benevolent but self-serving, implies God's warnings are lies, and suggests eating from the tree of knowledge is a good thing. Thus wrong is called right, right is called wrong, knowledge displaces trust and evil enters the story.

The third kind of disorder I'm going to call collusion. Collusion refers to the whole range from cynicism to profiteering to ambulance-chasing to insensitivity to compassion fatigue. None of these would exist on their own without sin or evil; few of them are so bad as to be called sin, but all of them corrode and diminish and impoverish the glory of the garden. Adam has a number of possible excuses in this story. He could say, "I didn't know where the fruit had come from." He could say "*She* started it." But at the very least he colluded in the sin. He doesn't put up any kind of a fight or even get into any kind of conversation about it. Eve gets into a theological discussion but Adam can't take his eyes off the ballgame for one moment and just eats whatever's put in front of him. Collusion is every time we say "I was too busy" or "I didn't think anyone would mind" or "I thought everyone did it" or "I thought it was best not to get involved." The story shows us how a mixture of commission and omission opens the door to sin and evil.

And the fourth kind of disorder I'm going to call lack of imagination. This is the kind of thing that we try to put in a different category altogether. We call it being in the wrong place at the wrong time, having a misunderstanding, being subject to unforeseen delays, or even being accident-prone. This is the territory of euphemisms, like a new employee not being a "good fit" or two in-laws experiencing a "clash of personalities". We might say it wasn't the woman and man's fault that they happened to be around when the serpent came back from winning first prize at the Garden of Eden debating competition. I wonder whether you've noticed that in communities where people do everything they can to be nice to each other, including churches, almost nothing gets put down to the first three categories and almost everything gets put into this fourth category called "it all went wrong and everyone's furious inside but no one can say anything because we've all decided it's nobody's fault." And that's how communities of faith can slowly turn into communities of grudge-bearing resentment. Over the centuries theologians have tried to take the heat out of Genesis 3 by saying it's simply a story about the human condition. But this obscures the fact that the human condition is one in which we continue to deceive ourselves about the reality of our sin.

Christians proclaim that in the life, death and resurrection of Christ we find that God forgives our sins and gives us the grace to forgive one another's sins. But here's the rub. There's nothing in there about forgiving evil, collusion and lack of imagination. The reason is that these other three disorders are all trying as hard as they can to pretend they're not sin. Evil says "What you think is sin is in fact great." Collusion says "Don't blame me, he did it first." Lack of imagination says "I'm sure he didn't do it on purpose." The trouble is, if it's not sin, it can't be forgiven. And so what's required is the painstaking work of breaking these other finely textured forms of disorder into individual acts of sin.

That's what the recent Truth Commission in Greensboro sought to do. It's what the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa did. It's a slow business of breaking down evil and collusion into individual acts of sin that could be named, admitted, repented of and forgiven. That's what has to happen when a family falls out or a marriage hits the rocks or a church goes pear-shaped. Everyone is desperate to call it something other than what it is. Say "these things happen", say "don't hold it against her," say "worse things happen at sea," but none of these work, because the bitterness and anger are still there. Only one thing can deal with those cancers, and it's not forgetfulness or denial – it's truth-telling and forgiveness, and that's only possible when you call sin what it is.

Turning anger and resentment into fuel for forgiveness and reconciliation through the painstaking process of identifying and naming particular sins is such an exhausting business we feel we want to avoid it altogether otherwise it would take over our lives. And that's why we set aside a period of time every year to do it properly. We call that season Lent. Lent is a game of two halves. In the first half we confront the collusion and lack of imagination in our lives and we realize how invested and entangled and bound up we are in sin without our being prepared to name it or face it or do anything about it. Fasting, prayer, scripture reading, confession, almsgiving – these traditional practices of Lent all remind us of how greedy and self-centered and willful and deceitful we are. And in the second half of Lent like the second half of a soccer game we turn and face the other way. We turn the attention away from ourselves to Jesus, to his path to the cross, and we realize that evil is something only God can overcome and the way God overcomes evil is through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus.

In short, the *stupidity* of sin is something we spend the first five weeks of Lent trying hard to overcome. And it costs us a lot. But the *perversity* of sin is something we spend the last two weeks of Lent realizing only God can overcome. And it costs God everything.

But we know Easter is coming. And we know that the truth of Christ is a more real, more thorough, more final and more permanent description of the human condition than the truth of Adam and Eve. The first Adam may be a myth but the second Adam is truth and life. And we get a hint of that when God sets up the Garden of Eden. Before he sets up the tree of knowledge, he 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.