

Genesis 2-3
Pymble 9.7.17
Learning limits in the garden

Perhaps more than any other passage in the Bible, when we come to Genesis 2 and 3 we have to confront and set aside previous understandings and theological overlays that we've heard but that the story itself will not bear. Yes it is tempting to demand of this story insights into the source of evil and death; to burden it with talk of "original sin" that God will later have to deal with; but the story itself isn't concerned with such abstract ideas. Rather, it is raising issues of what it means to be human and our willingness to obey our creator.

If I asked you to give me the outline of the story from memory, you would probably say that God put the man in the garden and told him not to eat of the fruit of the tree of good and evil. Generally our minds go to what God forbade – *you can't do this*. Yet there are other things that come before the prohibition. And indeed 3 things together tell us a great deal about our humanity before God.

Firstly, vocation. God puts the man in the Garden of Eden to till and keep it; to farm or work the land. A better translation is actually to "serve" the land. Contrary to popular belief, work is a good part of God's perfect world. In Australian folklore, we are supposed to abhor hard work and we are said to live for our weekends or an early retirement yet most of us know that *productive engagement*, in the widest sense, is a good thing. Those of you who have nurtured and tended a garden over years, seeing it grow and develop in response to your input, will know what I mean. Yes, it might be hard and tiring work but there is such satisfaction in the formation and development of a garden. I think the same could be said of growing a business, setting the direction of an organisation, or planting a church. It is good to be productive. It is good to have a sense of what you are about. And in the broadest possible terms,

our human vocation is to

live in, appreciate and look after God's creation;

to care for it, to enhance it through our creativity and energy.

And we have discovered somewhat more recently as a species that our very survival is tied up with this care of the created order.

To live with such a sense of vocation

– to know we play a valuable part in God's good world –

is a wonderful part of being human.

Secondly, within this garden of life is amazing freedom.

Funny how we latch onto God's prohibition

but are deaf to the permission he grants.

"You may freely eat of every tree in the garden..."

I wonder how large that garden was?

I wonder how it was organized?

Can you see it in your mind?

What incredible abundance

and all at the man's disposal;

everything was there for the man to eat and enjoy.

And not only food,

but God's provision is extended

to the creation of a special companion

who was "bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh"

because God saw that it was not good for the man to be alone.

Companionship, community, abundance of provision –

these all come before any limitations.

Sometimes we can be blind to all the goodness

that is ours to enjoy in God's wonderful world.

Thirdly, prohibition. Yes *"you may eat of any tree of the garden but not the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."*

There is incredible freedom and permission in God's world

but there is also limitation and prohibition.

Thou shalt not.

This is where we humans stumble.

The concern of the story is not what the tree represents,

nor what would happen if they ate of the tree of life instead

of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil;

the concern of the story is to show the created ones have a choice.

Will the man and woman obey the authority of their creator?

Will they stay within their limits?

Will they trust God?

Before we go any further let us note that these 3 'givens' reveal a great truth about our humanity.

To ***honour our vocation,***

to ***explore our freedom***

and to ***respect limitations*** placed on us
is to live as we are created to live.

It will nurture our well-being
far more than any vitamin supplements or exercise regime.
In this sweet spot of fidelity to God's way
will be found life and joy and satisfaction.

But into this garden of paradise comes the serpent –
never identified here as the devil –
whose role in the story is simply to raise an alternative agenda.
The prohibition, which was clearly non negotiable,
is now scrutinized and made to look like an option,
and a restricting option at that.
The serpent's words focus entirely on the prohibition,
never the permission,
and while the woman's response corrects that emphasis,
already the temptation has opened new possibilities
and an alternative approach to God's will and way.
The prohibition for the man and woman's benefit and safety
is now seen as an unnecessary restriction on their freedom;
a barrier to be circumnavigated.

Walter Brueggemann makes a lot of the fact that
the discussion between the woman and the serpent
is *about* God and never *to* or *with* God.
He suggests that too much of our theologizing or God-talk,
either with one another or in our own minds,
is ultimately analysis and calculating dialogue
designed to help us get around God's prohibitions.
Justifications; rationalisations; explanations –
anything to make us feel better about ignoring God's rules
and doing our own thing.

And so the woman eats, and the man eats.
The prohibition is violated;
God's permission is perverted
their vocation is neglected
and they find themselves exposed beyond safe boundaries.

Like many of Christ's parables, this story is not explained;
it is just left there for us to connect with and respond to.
Brueggemann says the story doesn't want to
"aid our theorizing but to catch us in our living".
What a wonderful phrase!
Where does this story catch you in your living?

Where does it resonate with you?
Is it simply in your choices and actions
that you know would be displeasing to God?
Or is it the very idea that there are prohibitions at all?
Do you kick against the goad when God says
that some things are not permissible?
That there are some limits in this human life, for our best?

This story seems to be something of a reflection
on human boundaries
and that recognizing and honouring boundaries
leads to our well being.
It reminds us as humans that
just because we *can* do something,
doesn't mean we *ought* to do it;
and I believe there are many applications of this
not just in our own personal ethics,
but also in terms of scientific and even medical innovation.
Just because we can extend life artificially,
doesn't necessarily mean we should;
just because we can develop certain weapons,
doesn't mean it is morally the right thing to do;
just because we can travel to Mars –
well I'm not sure this is the best use of our world resources,
but I know plenty of others think differently.
Just because we have the power and funds to invade a country
or take over a company or construct something,
doesn't make it the right course of action.

We could imagine the people of God,
perhaps at the time when Israel was at its height
under powerful kings,
feeling its strength, reveling in its wealth, making its mark,
thinking that anything was possible.
Perhaps such a story was told at times like that
as a caution and a reminder
that we live in God's world, on God's terms.
That we are not autonomous creatures with freedom to do anything.
There are limits.
There are consequences.
There is wisdom in living within God's ordained limits.
We are accountable to our creator.

Perhaps things aren't that different in Sydney today.
In many parts of our city there is such wealth, such freedom,
such ability, it seems, to do anything.

Like a young teenage boy
feeling his physical strength for the first time,
we feel there are no limits.
Yet our freedoms to do what we want,
for the Christ follower at least,
will be tempered by love for our neighbour,
perhaps the neighbour who doesn't have the same resources
or freedoms or choices that we have.
For we realise that often the exercise of our freedoms
can negatively impact others.
Yes we realise as Paul says in Corinthians,
*"In Christ, everything is permitted, but not everything is beneficial;
everything is permitted, but not everything builds up."*