

Second Sunday of Easter 2016 Evensong

Genesis 3: 8 – 15 (Galatians 4: 1 -5)

“Where there’s a blame, there’s a claim!” That’s the lawyers’ mantra, isn’t it? Have you noticed how there’s a particularly legal theme to both this evening’s readings? The New Testament lesson was all about the Law of Trusts – how title to property cannot vest in a minor, but has to be held in trust for them; and the Old Testament lesson – Adam and Eve squirming, naked because they’ve been found out by God – is all about the Law of Tort: it’s about determining where liability lies.

At English Law I can only get compensation for the predicament I’m in if I can prove that someone else is to blame for it. For a brief moment, after hundreds of years of legal history, it looked as if that might be set to change. The zenith of the vision of the Welfare State was that need should be provided for; and that if a citizen suffered loss, they should be compensated for

that loss on a needs basis rather than a fault basis. Ad so the Royal Commission chaired by Lord Pearson recommended the introduction of no-fault compensation for the victims of road traffic accidents. Only the report came too late. It was published in 1978, just months before the Labour Party was swept out of office for 18 years, the vision of Bevan, Beveridge and Butler was smashed and the consensus they represented – Labour, Liberal and Tory – was systematically dismantled. Since 1979 human nature has been allowed to run rampant, unchecked by any vision of civic responsibility. The Pearson Report was left unimplemented.

And human nature is preoccupied with blame. It’s a story as old as the Bible itself. God finds Adam and Eve ashamed of their nakedness and all he can say is “You can’t blame me, it was her.” And all she can say is “You can’t blame me, it was the snake.” Never mind “What can we do to put right the mess that we’re in?”

All that either of them is concerned to establish is that “I’m not to blame!”

Their preoccupation is with the pronoun “I.” “I heard . . . , I was afraid . . . , I was naked; I hid . . . I ate . . . I ate.” It’s I, I, I and as soon as I comes to predominate there is a breakdown of mutuality and trust and relationships become distorted.

This is not a story about disobedience and divine displeasure. In fact God does not exact the punishment he has threatened. He told Adam and Eve that they would die if they ate of the tree of knowledge, but he can’t do it. Their sentence is miraculously gracious. As one scholar has put it, it is “a story about the struggle God has in responding to the facts of human life. When the facts warrant death, God insists on life for his creatures.”¹ How’s about that? God struggles with responding to the facts of human life.

¹ Brueggemann [1982] Genesis

Life is filled with conflict and pain and sweat. And this is the result of people having an unhealthy amount of knowledge. The dilemma is that you can have too much of a good thing. You can know so much that there is no longer any element of trust and the mystery of life is shattered. Now if this is a fundamental, primordial truth, imagine its significance for us now, living in an age of information explosion. There are people who argue that we are beginning to live in a period of transition towards a new economic epoch; one where information will be more valuable than either capital or labour.² Knowledge really is power, and that’s more true now than ever. And yet knowledge is a dangerous thing, and that’s God’s truth.

Now, of course, this is not a plea for ignorance to replace knowledge. Nor is it a Luddite sort of plea for information technology to be rewound or un-invented. I have my smart phone in my pocket, my laptop on my desk and the novel I’m reading at the moment exists

² Paul Mason [2015] After Capitalism

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

only on some sort of virtual cloud from which I've downloaded it to my Kindle – in fact a while ago Adriane and I were both reading the same novel, at the same time, for which we had only paid once; because it had no intrinsic value – no material costs, no production costs, no transportation costs - because it did not intrinsically exist: it was just information; and, once we'd been prepared to pay a fee to control that information, we could share it for free between as many devised as we wanted. The world is changing so fast and so profoundly. And we should embrace that; we shouldn't want to resist it. But we should be astute to apply a bit of Wisdom to it – and that's Wisdom with a capital W.

Because that is the genre of the story we've been reading. I take it as read that it's not history: it's Wisdom Literature, a commentary giving divine insight into the nature of life. It's suggesting that well-being is promoted by honouring boundaries; and that some information is just too costly, even if it can be

shared for free. It's too costly in terms of the human suffering it causes.

So, just as capitalism has inflicted enormous human suffering – as well as bringing tremendous material benefit – so there will be risks of an information-led economy distorting relationships and promoting inequalities.

The invitation from faith is to apply the Wisdom of God and to ensure that our acquisitiveness for knowledge never outweighs our respect of the autonomy of others; and never becomes a tool with which to evade our responsibilities, and to be concerned only to shift the burden of blame to others.

Amen.