

No food for thought

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Lent 1 A – Gen 2.15-17, 3.1-7: Matt 4.1-11

Many years ago, a very small daughter and I happened to be talking about this morning's 'forbidden fruit' story. She said, 'Dad, I don't think Adam and Eve could have eaten the whole fruit. I think they probably only took a bite each and left the rest.' I asked her why she thought that, and she said, 'Because everyone thinks different things are good and evil.' She made good sense. Everyone who's come to that fruit since those two did – we've each bitten off a different bit of it, and so we each have a different angle on what we think is good or evil. Sometimes, agreeing on even basic things can be like pulling teeth – to stay with that bite theme.

Today's stories are about the temptation to replace God with ourselves – to make God redundant – to remake God into our own image. How can we be tempted to do that? The tempter in the garden tries to make the woman believe God is a liar; to believe God is petty and selfish. From there, it's only a very small step to imagine that we could do God's job ourselves, and do it better. All it takes is a little *bite* of extra knowledge.

When we acquire any new knowledge, one of the foolish things we can do is imagine we've got the whole picture. That's what the serpent tempted the woman to do; to imagine that she and the man might suddenly have, or even be, the whole picture. They weren't: as my little one said, they must only have taken one bite each.

It did give *some* knowledge. We're told that after eating, they *knew* their own nakedness. So they sewed fig leaves together to conceal their nakedness from each other. Concealment; lying entered the world. It brought division from each other, and

later, we'll also read that they hid from God.

The immediate effect of swallowing a lie was to divide them from God and from each other – the man would later blame the woman. Their primary relationships with each other and with God were damaged. God said death would come from eating this fruit. Lying and division were its immediate effects. They are the first nails in the coffin of relationship, risking the living death of loneliness.

The serpent's message was like that old slogan: 'Knowledge is power'. Fill yourselves with knowledge – quite literally; eat it, said the serpent. Power was the temptation in this forbidden fruit story; power was offered as a bribe to trick the woman and the man into losing their primary relationships. 'Eat – fill yourself with God's power. You will be like God.' It sounds a bit like ads for those fat burning tablets that are on the market nowadays – take these for an instant Godlike body. Don't bow to mere reality; eat like a pig and still knock 'em dead in your bathers.

Spiritual challenges address us as living, physical beings; as people in relationship. Today's Gospel is the mirror of the forbidden fruit story. It has to do with food and loyalty too. Genesis is about the lie that filling yourself with God's knowledge can make you independent of God. The Gospel is about the truth that freely emptying yourself of God's power, doing it for the sake of those you love, is to be like God.

So it's no coincidence that we see Jesus begin his story of healing the Genesis story when he fasts. And in the extremity of his need, the temptations to assert God-like power come to him too. But he resists them.

What do fasting and the power to resist temptation have to do with each other? And by fasting, I don't just mean from food. We can fast from speech, from self-righteous anger, from other bad habits – and we have six or seven weeks to replace them

with good habits.

On an empty stomach, with no prospect of a meal-break, you have time to dwell with aspects of yourself you hadn't noticed since those endless summer holidays of your childhood. Boredom; aimlessness; they are the realm of acutely heightened senses, of self-doubt; demons.

Fasting from routines and habits, you wrestle with demons that, only recently, you doubted even existed. But the point is that slowly – ever so slowly – as your weakness increases, you discover a power that is not yours. God's power. You learn to rely on God.

You've emptied yourself; you've opened yourself to being filled by God. You've discovered not power, but service; not competition, but community. And at that point, you're discovering interdependence and vulnerability as cornerstones to the relationship of love and freedom we find together in the service of Jesus. Amen.