

St Peter's, Ealing
Sunday 1st March 2020
Lent 1

The Way of Salvation

The Italian Jewish Bible Commentator Umberto Cassuto suggested in his commentary From Adam to Noah that the Torah alludes to the fact that although the sinner strives to forget or erase from human memory their offence, they cannot silence the voice of their conscience and obliterate all vestiges of their deeds. At every turn and step they are confronted by things that remind them and others of their sin.

Rabbi Shir Ha-shirim, when thinking of sin and its effects suggested that before a man sinned, he inspired fear and awe. Yet once he has sinned, he is given up to fear and awe and is frightened of others. So before Adam sinned he could listen to God standing upright without being afraid. After his sin, upon hearing God, Adam is frightened and hides himself and in Genesis 1:10, omitted from today's pericope, we hear Adam admit, 'I heard your voice...and was afraid'.

Sin becomes that brokenness which we carry within us. It is something that makes us less than what we could be and separates us from the potential to be more than we are.

The Genesis story we read today, often referred to as the second, possibly third, creation story focuses on the place of humanity within creation. It is telling that in this section the creation of the world takes place in the first couple of verses with the main thrust of the story focusing on Adam and Eve, the epitome of humanity in all its simplicity and beauty.

In this story God gives only one command or law, 'Do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil' and yet, even this one command humanity cannot keep. Sin existed before this event in that the ability to disobey God existed from the moment of creation coming into being. Sin is animated, if that is the right word, when actions are taken to counter God's word. Sin becomes real as Adam and Eve bite into that dreadful apple.

This story tells the reader or listener how they sin and what sin is. Sin is acting against God's word and humanity is shown up here on being easily capable of sin, of going against the wishes of God.

Following Cassuto's comments then sin blemishes the very existence of the sinner. He or she may seek to hide or ignore their sin, but they cannot forget it, it is always on their heart, a blemish that cannot be washed away.

And so many carry that mark within them; are hurt daily by the remembrance of that which they carry in their heart, their brokenness and incompleteness in life. No longer can we stand tall as Rabbi Ha-shirim suggests. Instead we look to the ground, bowed by the weight of sin.

Paul offers a sign of hope as he writes to Christians in Rome. It seems mad that one person can save the whole of humanity. Yet, by drawing on the archetype of Adam as fallen humanity, Paul takes Christ Jesus as the precedent for the universality of Christ's atonement for our sins. To paraphrase Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians, if in Adam all are brought to death, so through Christ Jesus all are made alive. But how?

Through Jesus we can receive forgiveness of those sins that weigh us down, that prevent us from obtaining our full potential in God.

For Paul, the proof for the ubiquity of sin is the universality of death – the ultimate outworking of sin in the world. If this is so then the proof for God's forgiveness is life everlasting. And how do we know this to be true?

The very story of Jesus, who places God firmly at the centre of all things, re-affirming adherence to the law and therefore the rule of God in creation proclaimed through the scriptures. As Jesus is tempted by the devil he quotes the Torah, the law, the duty of humanity towards God, and in so doing re-asserts God's primacy in all things – made all the more clear in that the reader knows all these things on offer, power, authority, wealth, would be accepted by a lesser person. And that all these things on offer already belong to the Son of God who has come to destroy the power of the evil one, to destroy death itself and to reaffirm the primacy of the Kingdom God. As the Messiah, Jesus shows the reader the way of salvation; to walk in the way of God; to follow God's laws and to do the will of God, witnessing to God's love on our lives.

It is this we are called to, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To be more Christ-like; walking in the way of God and not following the lead of the world. In so doing, like Jesus, the new Adam, we are able to stand tall and be feared, held in awe as Cassuto describes our right relationship with God.

As we enter Lent this state of life is drawn starkly before us, the brokenness of humanity of which we are part. We opened Lent on Ash Wednesday by being exhorted to remember we are dust. Yet in the Gospel we are called to be much more; to be more Christ-like. And to be more Christ-like requires of us a response that counters that of the Adam that hid from God in the Garden. To be able to stand up and declare to God; here I am, it is in you I am renewed, healed and made whole.