

10th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Fr Jonathan Jong

Genesis 3.9-15

2 Corinthians 4.13-5.1

Mark 3.20-35

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

A couple's first big fight is a doozy. It feels weighty, existential; it raises questions in their minds, and doubts, and therefore breeds anxiety, which hardly helps. It is a story often told, and since the very beginning of things as we have just heard it: perhaps he blames her for something of which he is hardly innocent, and maybe she—too kind to repay the accusation, but too defensive to admit her part—takes it out on someone else, and before they know it, their mouths are too dusty to make up and their egos too bruised to back down, under the curse of bitterness

and resentment of their own making. Before they know it, Eden is lost to them, those heady days when they in their naked delight in each other still felt like one flesh, an indivisible home, never to be cleft asunder, and certainly not by petty fingers pedantically pointed: he said, she said, and all that. Now, all they have is each other; the garden behind them and the world before them.

They have each other, which might not be what they want in the moment, but—God knows—it is what they need.

What we are missing, of course, is the bit between this third chapter of the book of Genesis, at the end of which the couple is cast out of the bliss they had once known, and the fourth chapter, at whose beginning we are told that they have had children. I want to know how they recovered from losing their garden of delight that was given them, the birthright of new love. I want to know how they grew together a new home, a family,

out of this foreign soil just east of paradise, prickly and recalcitrant with self-defensiveness, the afterglow of marital conflict. Did it take time, or therapy? Or were they quick to take comfort in one another in difficult circumstances, quick to walk in step, eyes forward and hands held, to brave this new world together?

We are not told, not even in the apocryphal *Apocalypse of Moses*, from the first century, which recounts the story of Eve and Adam from their expulsion to their deaths. He falls sick, aged 930 or thereabouts, and she says to him “Adam, rise up and give me half of thy trouble and I will endure it”; and again, “How is it that thou diest and I live? How long have I to live after thou art dead?” And when he does die, she weeps for him bitter tears, until she too dies just six days later. They were buried together at the last.

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Jesus has approximately no direct advice to give to young couples, except to remind us that there is no marriage in heaven, in Matthew chapter 22, which I am tempted to have as a reading at my own wedding; don't tell my fiancée. In fact, despite the cacophonous appeal to Christianity from certain parts of the political right in their promotion of what they call "family values", Jesus is, to put it mildly, ambivalent about the nuclear family, and no wonder, given the familial dysfunction scattered all over the Bible: Cain and Abel; Abraham and Sarah and Hagar; Jacob and Esau; Samson and Delilah; David and Absalom.

Jesus himself seems to have remained unmarried, novelistic speculations notwithstanding; and his relationship with his parents cannot plausibly be described as the paragon of filial piety, at least not by East Asian standards. Recall the running away as a teenager, to hang out in Jerusalem; or the reaction against his mother's showing him off at Cana; or this

shade thrown at his relatives who, to be fair to him, wanted him sectioned.

And yet, of course, it is parental language that he used and we too for God, our Father. And it is the language of kinship that we share with one another, brothers and sisters in Christ, and co-heirs with him. And it is marriage that is our sacrament of our union with God, the participation in whom is what makes marriage possible in the first place, that most impossible thing of knowing and loving someone come hell or high-water, come laundry left strewn or cupboard doors left open; or more impossible still, of being known and loved by them.

It is not that familial and marital relationships are denigrated, then, so much as relativised, re-conceived as imperfect and transient signs of things perfect and eternal, the hope of glory promised. Imperfect and transient, and therefore not to be fetishised. But signs,

and therefore to be enacted as faithfully as possible as witnesses to the reality they make present.

Or, it is not familial and marital relationships that Jesus denigrates but our magical beliefs about them, and the laziness ensued by our assumptions that blood is always thicker than water, or that lovers' bonds are indelible because registrar's ink is or, worse still, because the Church has declared it so from her chair of pontification. Our relationships are not mere facts about us, to be taken for granted, but vocations: occasions of God's calling us, calling us to do better by one another, to be better—truer—parents and siblings and spouses and children.

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God knows, relationships are hard work, not least because *we* are hard work, extraverts no less than introverts, the vivacious no less than the rest of us who would rather just be left alone with our

headphones and comic books, thanks very much. We are hard work with our luggage cases full of insecurity, marked fragile, from histories of disappointment and betrayal, poor decisions made by all parties concerned. Emotional baggage, people call it; demons, in the old money. The same principle applies to those who hurt us too, of course; and whom we hurt in return, if not with our fists then with our faces, if not with our words then with our silence.

It is not for nothing, then, that there are, in the gospels, stories of miracles alongside the stringent moral demands. Christ cures us and casts out our demons, just as he calls us out on our callousness and cowardice. And so it is, then, that the gospel is among other things surely also the promise that we can do better, be better, not because of Christ's good example, but because of what he has done for us, of what he was wrought in us by the mystery of the incarnation, and of our baptism, and of bread and wine transformed into the seeds of Eden made new.

We are not to lose heart, we are told, just because we cannot see past our pain right now—or our resentment or our anger—cannot yet see the home built for us and for our reconciliation with those we have lost for now or forever to the fallibilities of compassion and courage. I do not know how Adam and Eve recovered, from him throwing her under the bus, from her falling beguiled for the slick silvertongue. I do not know how Jesus and his family recovered, from his evident disregard for their feelings, from their failure to support him when it mattered. I don't know how my own estrangements will heal, nor yours; and maybe they won't on this side of glory, and maybe that's for the best for now. Or maybe one day, when enough has wasted away and enough has been renewed, we will find it in ourselves—by God's grace and goodness—to drop our fiery swords, and share again a garden, a home.