**the Faithfulness of God**

Our theme for today reflects **the Faithfulness of God** when we fail him and need to be restored to a faithful relationship with Him.

(Personally I find the process of preparing a sermon challenging….Popcorn brain, production and then ordering the mass/mess of ideas. Healthy process…you learn more than you share, gives voice , fostering humility and openness to comment and further questions and more….)

Today’s first reading from Genesis is often referred to as The Fall, or the first account of falling out of the ideal relationship with God the Father and Creator of us all.

The concept of original sin is attributed to this passage which recounts how God’s ‘very good’ creation shifted from innocence to a pronounced sense of shame and guilt. Eve and Adam, and from that time forward, to more and more accounts of the ills of the Hebrews and their ongoing fraught relationship with God.

 People have debated, even argued, about the concept of original sin since time immemorial. In the Old Testament the Hebrews wrestled with the implications of sin and the interpretation and practice of God’s Laws as delivered later by Moses. Sad to say, historically, violence has emerged out of such debate.

And today, Christians still ponder about how to interpret the accounts of Adam and Eve in Genesis; the keeping of God’s commandments; and what difference the Good News of Jesus makes.

To recap our Genesis reading, essentially, Eve hears God’s command not to eat of the Tree of The Knowledge of Good and Evil. She succumbs to the temptations and lies of the serpent and eats of the tree, and persuades Adan to do the same.

From then on, the most common interpretation of this scripture by Christian theologians and followers has been that we all have inherited the condition of sin. Maybe not guilty of Adam’s particular sin but collectively prone to Sin given that we all displease God by ignoring or disobeying him.

A personal story, many years ago some children …broke into our house, they scribbled on the walls, ate our food, broke stuff etc. They were young children, when we addressed our concerns with the parents they responded with the argument that the children didn’t know this was wrong - so by their reasoning, it wasn’t an offence at all. End of story, and from their point of view no consequence was called for. This was challenging for us.

However, today’s Letter to the Roman Christians seems to confirm this kind of reasoning, that sin, the inclination to do wrong, preceded the knowledge of good and evil and therefore of wrongdoing and shame. Were Adam and Eve in blissful ignorance until they disobeyed? It doesn’t sit well though with our common view that the wrongdoing of children needs the discipline and correction of tough Love. You are right in your thinking , as I read around the subject and the theology I still get confused. Interpretations are questionable.

So, I put the pieces together like this and I am interested to hear how others connect these passages.

Figuratively, I picture a leaning tower, at a precarious angle. Not a question of whether it will fall but when. Like a game of Jenga, the suspense is killing me.

We are like such towers, maybe we think we are never to fall or fail morally, but never the less we are all inclined to fall and sooner or later we do. How hard we fall; how great the impact might be relative. But fall we will.

So is the nature of sin, when we fall, or fail, we hurt ourselves, our loved ones, friends, family, neighbours and by definition we offend God.

Perhaps there are push factors both in our personal lives and in the collective life of churches. The *Religion and Ethics Report* on ABC radio this week spoke of such factors within Megachurches. You have all heard the adage ,’ Pride comes before a fall’, or more Biblically we take note of passages about false prophets and shepherds; power imbalances that lead to abuse, I note a documentary I viewed last week about the Gloriavale cult in NZ. (link) A gradual process from trust and joy to slavery and abuse in the name of God.

How we feel or respond to these conditions of sin varies.

Adam and Eve, we are told, ‘” At once they saw what they had done, and they realised they were naked. Then they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves.”

If there is one thing we as humans are good at it is at covering up our own sin, at rationalising our own guilt by distancing the crime from our own responsibility.

“It wasn’t our fault”,
“we didn’t know “,
“someone else provoked us”
or caused us to sin.

“We are right, they are wrong”
We justify our actions or thoughts by reducing our guilt and inflating the guilt of others. In some way, shape or form, we all do it. At one end of the spectrum the conviction of guilt may finally rest with us and we apologise or make right our wrongs, best we can. At the other end of the spectrum we lapse into self-righteousness and/or the absolute deception of complete innocence. Of course, there is every variation under the sun as to how to measure guilt and what justice might look like in any particular circumstance. Justice is complicated. Most countries have a rule of law that continually grapples with issues of Justice and community expectations. We are all in this together as they say.

This week, in the Wednesday faith conversations we had a rich discussion about this verse,

**‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness for they will be filled.** NRSV.

We examined together many possible translations of this verse from Matthew 5: v6 commonly recognised as part of the Beatitudes or The Blessed text. We tried to find a synonym for righteousness, and further to expand on our understanding of this verse and its context.

(Whilst we agreed that some translations were closer to our theological understandings of righteousness than others, a direct translation into English is a bit elusive.

One reason being, that today in our culture, righteousness gets confused, by association, with self–righteousness. And also, by association, with negativity which sadly is attributed to people of faith. The word righteousness is certainly not part of everyday conversation. )

Perhaps we, at faith conversations, found it easier to suggest what righteousness is **not**.

We were very aware of the sins of greed, of worldliness, of dictators, of violence, of perpetual war and aggression, of the exploitation of children and the poor and of disregard for God’s Creation.

We were all agreed upon the need for reconciliation in families and between cultures. We were acutely aware of the grief, the mourning, such sin causes and our desire for humility and a-seeking after Godliness.

( You may choose to read the Great Dictator, Charlie Chaplains brave outspoken film and famous speech………also broad cast this week on SBS TV link).

Paul, in todays passage from Romans, links Adam’s sin, to **our** inherited sinfulness, how our sins relate to the Law and ultimately to God’s rescue plan delivered through Christ Jesus.

What is this plan? Jesus our Lord, being both human and divine is the only One who lived out a perfect righteous life on earth. ‘His Death and Resurrection are the means for our salvation or rescue. We are called to place our faith in Him, to listen to Him, to Trust and Obey Him. As we endeavour to do so, we are blessed and ….oooops well ……. we do sadly at times,….we fail!

We echo in our hearts and minds the woes of St Paul the apostle, he writes in Romans chapter 7, a lengthy and agonising account of his battle to understand and contend with his own sinfulness. “O wretched man that I am”, ’he laments,’

*(the Law and its commands are holy and correct and good.*

*Am I saying something good caused my death? Certainly not! It was sin that killed me “ CEV …..)*

To feel this state of sinfulness, the desire to repent or turn away from sin and to be made right with God can feel woeful, as Paul says, wretched.

Need cheering up? Today’s Psalm, a song of King David, is ultimately pretty comforting,

*Before I confessed my sins, my bones felt limp, and I groaned all day long.
Night and day Your hand weighed heavily on me, and my strength was gone as in the summer heat.*

The summer heat, surely we in Australia, know what this feels like.

*whenever we find out that we have sinned.
Then ..in God…we won't be swept away by a raging flood.*

A raging flood? Images quickly fill our minds, we get this imagery too… the recent NZ disaster or the Northern Rivers a year ago, the swiftly rising waters, overwhelming sludge and personal trauma. (We may recall similar devastation in Germany in 2021, unexpectedly sweeping away people’s homes and livelihoods.) Without rescue there is no hope, without that relationship with someone who has the ability or power to help, to deliver, there is no hope.

In a spiritual sense hopelessness can be just as terrifying and soul- destroying. Guilt can be overwhelming and deadly.

Yet our Psalm for today is entitled, **The Joy of Forgiveness.**

*Our Lord, you bless everyone whose sins you forgive and wipe away.
You bless them by saying,*

*“You told me your sins, without trying to hide them, and now I forgive you.”*

*You are my hiding place! You protect me from trouble*

Yes, we sin, and yes, we are inclined to compare and contrast the sin of one person with the apparent sins of another. We can be so blinkered in our understanding of other people that we judge and condemn, we lack compassion. We then meander hopelessly about in our own hearts and minds and struggle to justify or understand even our own perspectives as to what is just and fair. Sometimes we even confuse ourselves. We do look for a hiding place!

However, if there is one thing we can be certain of, that is, the foundation of our Christian faith. It is not about self-justification or self-righteousness at all. Paul puts it like this,

# **Romans 5**

# **Contemporary English Version**

*By faith we have been made acceptable to God. And now, thanks to our Lord Jesus Christ, we have peace with God. Christ has also introduced us to God's gift of undeserved grace on which we now take our stand. ( So we are happy, as we look forward to sharing in the glory of God. But that's not all!*

*We gladly suffer, because we know that suffering helps us to endure. And endurance builds character, which gives us a hope that will never disappoint us. All of this happens because God has given us the Holy Spirit, who fills our hearts with his love.)*

We have a faith that restores us, that fills us with relief, with Peace, with Joy and Love and Hope.

We are forgiven, not because our sins are small and insignificant but because Gods nature is abundantly Loving and Merciful. He extends to us all this profound undeserved Grace.

# **John 3:16 invite to recite……**

# **Contemporary English Version**

*God loved the people of this world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who has faith in him will have eternal life and never really die.*

Does this let us of the hook of being responsible for our actions, of erasing every attempt to bring justice and sustenance to the poor. No, definitely not.

Our congregation has affirmed that our purpose is to be **Just Like Jesus.**

We have agreed to prayerfully explore what this means not just for us as individuals, but as a community of Christs followers within our broader community and indeed the world beyond. To strive to give God the glory, best we can in word and action.

We are invited by God to know this saving Grace and feel the liberation of a people whose lives are full of Blessings.

To return to the Psalm,

*your kindness shields those who trust you, Lord.
And so your good people should celebrate and shout. ’Ps 32.*

It is a joy to be together today to worship our Faithful God, to celebrate and sing His praises.