**Truth and forgiveness. A tale of two Edens. Janice Nelson/Chris Dalton**

We have had a disastrous start to 2020, with the most destructive natural disaster anywhere in the world, at least in modern history. ¾ of the forests surrounding Eden have been burnt, and an incredible ¼ of all Australia’s forests. We are considered ground zero for climate change by the rest of the world, yet we refuse to reduce our emissions, and in fact intend to export even more fossil fuel to the developing world. We have had destructive hailstorms, floods and are now facing the Covid 19 pandemic. It is too much; where do we find hope for a brighter future? Where do we find hope for future generations? Do we deserve a brighter future when we have overpopulated the world, destroyed so much habitable land and used the bulk of the fossil fuels stored over millions of years in just a century or two. Do we have anything to learn from today’s readings?

Life before the fall was idyllic and Adam and Eve lived in close relationship with God. The Garden of Eden was a garden of plenty, planted by God, with supernatural trees offering divine gifts and at least one animal that talked, that is, the serpent. God lived in the garden, and spoke with Adam and Eve. The garden has all the qualities of a mythical place, a dwelling place of gods. If this is mythical though, what can we learn from it? It was written for a reason.

God tells Adam and Eve, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; **17**but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”

The serpent converses with Eve, and questions her about what she has been told by God. She is told by the serpent that God has misled her, that she will not die, but rather gain wisdom. The tree is desirable, surely it is a good thing to discern good from evil, so both Adam and Eve eat, but contrary to what God has told them, they do not die, at least not there and then. The ‘wisdom’ they gain, is the awareness of their nakedness, which they hurriedly cover. What a strange sort of wisdom. What a strange story! It is a story of rebellion, disobedience, broken relationships, of alienation from God. That extraordinary intimacy with God in the garden of Eden has been broken, and they are left in a vulnerable state. Adam and Eve are at odds with each other, Eve is blamed for Adam’s transgression, even the earth doesn’t provide for them as it once did. The serpent told them that if they ate of the forbidden tree they would become godlike, but the opposite seems to have occurred. They are cast out, can no longer converse readily with God, and have become mortal.

Discernment of good and evil, wisdom, surely ought to be a good thing though? It is certainly something Israel’s Kings aimed to achieve. The punishment of exile results though, when Adam and Eve disobey God’s request to leave that particular tree alone, and the exile includes hard toil in the fields to scrape a living, and for the women painful labour.

The Genesis reading today is known as the ‘fall’ but in a way it is an attempt by man and woman to want to elevate their status. They have become arrogant, thinking they can disregard God’s word and decide for themselves what behaviour is acceptable and what is not. Like the serpent in Genesis, Satan likewise tempts Jesus, in the Matthew reading, to attain God like status by turning stones into bread, defying gravity by flinging himself off a cliff, by ruling over great territories. This is not the way to attain an intimate relationship with God.

We have our own much loved Eden here of course, a town well named. Many of us fled Eden recently to exile in neighbouring towns or further afield due to the 60 kilometre fire front that travelled from the other side of the Victorian border in just a few hours. Eden has featured on news items overseas, certainly in Norway and Britain, and likely many other countries. So many other towns, countless towns, were also severely impacted by fires this summer, but I suspect the name Eden resonated with viewers overseas, as a paradise lost, or rather nearly lost, as it was the surrounding area that was so severely impacted. People in Europe in particular cannot understand why we are not playing our part in attempting to reduce our carbon footprint, even when the Great Barrier Reef is bleaching and the whole of the eastern seaboard of Australia has been on fire, along with multiple other parts of Australia. It has been a summer of horror, and such summers are likely to become the norm in future if carbon emissions are not controlled. That is unthinkable.

I was shocked to hear that we are the major exporter of both coal and natural gas to the rest of the world, and the world’s 3rd biggest fossil fuel producer. We have only 0.3 percent of the world’s populations, yet 1.3 percent of carbon emissions are directly attributable to us, and a further 3.25 percent indirectly attributable due to our exports. This will increase further if the Galilee Basin is allowhed to develop. We have further increased atmospheric carbon, at least in the short term, due to the burning of countless trees. We are a big player, punching well above our weight. How arrogant of us to think that this is acceptable.

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The story of the Garden of Eden has its parallels in the debate about the bushfires:

* In Eden, where we avoided the worst of the bushfires, do we think there is some truth in the claims that climate change is not as bad as the scientists say? (the snake cast doubt on what God said to Adam & Eve)
* Some suggest we have carbon emissions under control, and that the scientists have got it wrong (God got it wrong; the snake said "you will not die, your eyes will be opened")
* Maybe we will survive climate change, but the world as we know it will change (Adam &Eve did not die, but the world as they knew it changed)
* The Government says its existing policies and knowledge are sufficient (we have become like God), but in reality are we deluding ourselves, as we are only scratching the surface of all there is to know?
* As Howard Wallace says in his commentary on Genesis, the story is about hubris (excessive pride, presumption and arrogance), and this is picked up in the story of the temptations of Jesus - the temptation to believe that we can rely on science and technology to overcome the problems we have created (we can work miracles); the temptation for politicians to believe their risky actions will prevent Australia succumbing to a dreadful fate (somehow, magically, the forecast climate disaster will be avoided); and the temptation to believe that having political power is of uppermost importance (forget truth and integrity, worship power, adopt policies that will help win the next election)

Of course this is applying a particular interpretation to the Bible passages, but what it demonstrates is the application of the story at an institutional level, rather than a focus on individual morality, which is how the passages are most often applied.  But is this getting too political?  Isn't the Genesis story primarily about individual sin?  Should faith keep out of environmental politics?

We need to explore what we understand as sin at an institutional level.  An "easy" relevant example is that of the church's atrocious record with regard to paedophilia.  Individuals were at fault, but also at an institutional level church and state-run children's homes and schools were at fault.  And the problem had to be corrected at an institutional level as well as an individual level.

How, then, might institutional sin be applied to climate change?

The worldwide Anglican Communion Environmental Network  has declared that the *wilful destruction of the environment is a sin*.  And the Pope has branded environmental exploitation as a *sin of our times*.  And in this context, I would argue, the global level of carbon emissions is a sin.  A sin against God's good and beloved creation as it is leading to the destruction of that creation.  This fact, I believe, is now accepted by all but a few, and the debate is now about whether we are doing enough to reduce carbon emissions.  In this regard, I would argue that seeking to reduce carbon emissions just to a level that enables the world to be sustainable enough to enable humanity to survive is also a sin, for it does not meet our God-given responsibility of serving creation, and a stewardship that promotes the flourishing of all creation, not just humanity.

It's here that some differences between individual and institutional sin become relevant.  As individuals we may live a lifestyle that produces a very small carbon footprint.  But we are still accessories to the institutional sin of carbon emissions arising out of electricity generation, economic growth and legislation that provides insufficient protection to the environment - like the logging of the Amazon rainforest, and manmade climate change that produces drought and horrendous bushfires.

We need to recognise the truth of the environmental destruction our lifestyle and standard of living is causing and ask for forgiveness from the Earth for our sin.

The Biblical passage I think of when looking at the issue of our responsibilities to serve God's good creation is that of the Parable of the Good Samaritan.  The Good Samaritan, at his own expense, tended to a severely wounded traveller.  For us, the severely wounded traveller is the Earth.  Do we pass by on the other side, saying we're too busy, we have higher mission priorities, we're not responsible for the Earth's wounds, and we certainly shouldn't have to pay for Earth's recovery unless others pay their fair share.

Earth, forgive us, for we know not what we do