

## A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Lent 1 Year A                      February 10<sup>th</sup> 08  
St Mark's                              Gen.2.15-17, 3.1-7  
Sin's True Nature                Matt.4.1-11

In the first reading for today, the first Sunday of Lent we meet a woman in a garden talking with someone whose identity she doesn't know. It all leads to a moment of shocking recognition – the recognition of shame.

In six weeks time we shall meet another woman in another garden, also talking with someone she doesn't recognise – but what a different and joyful recognition that story leads to!

Today's story from Genesis makes us ask the question, 'What is sin? What is its true, inner nature?' In a symbolic tale we're forced to look at the deepest issues about what makes us human – and what undoes our humanity. Is sin simply disobedience – being naughty – breaking the commandments and not doing what you're told? Or is it something else? And how far is sin our own responsibility? Does

someone or something else 'make us do it', or does the temptation come entirely from within, from our own nature?

Not long after this service I shall be baptising a baby. In that service I shall ask his sponsors to state some important decisions for him –decisions to turn away from sin and evil, and to turn to Christ. The question concerning sin and evil is itself divided into three parts and each of them casts an interesting light on the nature of sin: first, *Do you reject the devil and all rebellion against God?*

This picks up the truth given to us symbolically in the Genesis story in the person of the serpent– that there are pre-existing forces in the world into which we are born which are opposed to God's way. They are powerful forces, tempting, and all-too capable of snaring us – but they can be recognised for what they are and rejected. We are not totally helpless and in their sway.

The second question, I think, makes us look more within: *Do you renounce the deceit and corruption of evil?* Of course, we can be deceived from without,

but very often only because we are deceiving ourselves deep within, and thus ripe for the plucking. The word 'corruption' sometimes mean 'rotteness', and we all know how rottenness in an apple can be hidden behind an apparently attractive exterior. The prophet Jeremiah is known as a gloomy prophet, and you may think the verse from his teaching that goes, 'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt...' (17.9) justly earns him that description. But, you know, there's a truth in it isn't there? Just think how often we believe what it suits us to believe, and see what it suits us to see... Why else, do you suppose, do people usually read newspapers which share their own prejudices and outlook? If we are to confront sin, we have to look within – shine the searchlight there, and try to be really honest about our motives and what has shaped our thinking up to now – and why. Growing in self-knowledge isn't self-indulgent navel-gazing, distracting us from our real work and duty. On the contrary, too often, the work and activity we frenetically embrace is really something we do to distract us from the discomfort of pursuing self-knowledge.

The third baptismal question about sin is this: *Do you repent of the sins which separate us from God and neighbour?* - and this contains a very important insight about what sin is and how to recognise it. Sin isn't just a bit of naughtiness or breaking the rules. Sin means breaking relationships.

This is why Christians have always seen at the heart of Eve and Adam's sin not just disobedience to God – but something deeper still. Pride. Pride is seen in our Christian tradition as the fundamental sin because it's the quality that says – 'I don't need you, thank you. I can manage without you.' Or even, 'I would rather *not* manage than let anyone help me – let alone you.' Not much room for relationship there.

Why does the sin in the Garden of Eden story typify pride? Because Adam and Eve want to be like God through eating the forbidden fruit – that is, independently. From the beginning it had been written into their nature – our nature – that they should *be in the image* of God: but that gift is given through their (and our) being in relationship with God – conversing with him face to face, and in doing so

reflecting his image, as in a mirror. Eve and Adam have been fooled – you can be godlike on your own account, the serpent has said. And their hearts have entertained it. And in doing so, they have broken relationship with God from whom they now hide – and they've also broken relationship with each other (because they start squabbling), and with their physical nature (because they become ashamed of it), and with the world around, which becomes an object to work on, rather than a garden to tend.

St John, in his first Epistle, tells us a wonderful thing: through Christ all this is undone. We can look forward to reflecting God's image again in the proper way when we see him as he is, at the end. We shall *know as we are known*, says Paul. The mirror will no longer be cracked. And already we can have the confidence of knowing that, even in this life, we are God's children. So the path to relationship has been remade for us. It's just up to us to follow that path always relying on God and the help he gives us through one another - not building the walls of separation again.

But we have to watch out, all the time for that pride which separates from God and neighbour. It masquerades under so many forms. It can be hidden within outward religiosity and faith, which works too hard to justify itself. It even masquerades under excessive humility – the attitude that says I can never be good enough for God; my sins are too big ever to be forgiven. I'm just not worthy of love.

How is that pride? Well, isn't it the belief that somehow you or I – all our badness and nastiness – are bigger than God, bigger than his mercy, bigger than his love. Just too much for him. If that's not pride, I don't know what is.

What a terrible lie people sometimes tell themselves, a particularly unnecessary wall of separation that they throw up.

So, pride is really the most dangerous thing we need to look out for – the pride that rejects our essential relationship with God, our interconnectedness with, each other, our dependence upon our physicality, and our kinship with the world the world around us. Pride is the sin which makes strangers of them all.

Which brings me to our Lent Course, for which many of you have already signed-up. It's called '*Strangers Recognised*' and will be followed in discussion groups at different times during the week. It's still not too late to sign-up.

In doing it, we'll immediately be involved in a kind of interconnectedness – not just with each other in our groups, listening for the voice of God's Spirit through each others' contributions – but also with our Diocese of Ely, from whom this Lent course comes. It's good, sometimes, to be reminded that we're part of that bigger family, which covers such a wide variety of places. Cambridge isn't the centre of the earth – it's not even the centre of the Diocese of Ely! And we'll be celebrating interconnectedness, too, with Christians of another tradition – our German Lutheran friends, who will be sharing the groups with us.

But, all that aside, the themes of this course encourage us to overcome walls of separation – between ourselves and people different from us – strangers – even those in the next pew, whose truth

and depth we don't really know. And also between ourselves and ourselves – considering how we come to self-knowledge, sometimes through struggle. And between ourselves and God – considering how people recognise him in the sometimes surprising ways in which he encounters us.

'Strangers Recognised' – it's a wonderful title; it suggests that throughout our lives, as we move towards God, again and again walls of separation can be broken down, and light can dawn in 'penny-dropping' moments of recognition.

May we all discover such 'penny-dropping' moments, one way or another this Lent, and be ready to enter into the experience of Mary of Magdalene on Easter Day, when the walls were definitively broken down, and she recognised the greatest Stranger of them all.