

FOUNDATIONS OF FAITH: V. REDEMPTION

“The seed of the woman shall bruise thy head”

We come now to the fifth sermon on the great themes of the Christian Faith, as disclosed in Genesis chapters 1 through 3. Hitherto we have spoken (albeit all too briefly) about God, Creation, Man and Sin. Now we come to the last: Redemption. It is a wonder how quickly the opening pages of Scripture turn from one of these themes to the other. God had scarcely created man in his image, called the whole creation good, and taken his Sabbath rest before man turned rebel, threw off the yoke of God’s command and discovered in the process alienation, guilt and despair. Paradise Found all too quickly becomes Paradise Lost.

With man’s sin a terrible gloom descends upon creation. A dark curtain falls, signaling not the end of the play but apparently the end of hope. God’s requirement of Adam and Eve was clear not only in what it proscribed but in its statement of the consequences of its violation. The story teller set the scene well in Chapter 2:

And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. . . . And the Lord God took the man, and put him in the Garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

- Genesis 2:8-9, 15-17

Last week I read to you a portion of Davie Napier’s sermon/poem on Genesis 3 from his book, *Come, Sweet Death*. With sensitivity, poetic insight, and a distinct dash of wit Napier enters into the mind of Adam and in the process throws a great deal of light on the nature of man’s rebellion and the extent of his loss. He pictures well the arrogance of man and his inclination to his own way. And then, after depicting the fall so fulsomely, in a final brief paragraph, he points as well to the topic for today.

Sweet Eve, you say you thought you heard him laugh?
 I heard him say, "*How can I give you up?*
How can I hand you over?" Then a word
 about another silly little tree—
 an antidotal tree, redemptive tree.
 And then—this must be when you thought he laughed—
 I think I heard him sob.

I think he wept.

The focus through almost the whole of the Napier sermon, like the focus through almost the whole of Genesis 3, is on the rebellion, the disobedience and the fall of man. But at the end, through that final paragraph, the focus shifts dramatically from man to God, from the hardness of the heart of man to the brokenness of the heart of God, from man's loss of innocence to God's promise of redemption: "then a word about another . . . tree—an antidotal, redemptive tree."

In the same way the author of Genesis 3, having told the story of man's deception and sin, of his loss—unable to face God who came to commune with him in the cool of the day, of his fear and shame—aware now of his nakedness, his attempt to hide himself, his so-called confession in which he tried to shift the blame, and finally of his punishment,—the author of Genesis 3, having described all of that, and before telling of man's banishment from paradise, includes this one verse of God's sentencing of the serpent: "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel."

This verse, Genesis 3:15, has been called the *proto-evangelium*, the first promise of the Gospel, the first foretelling of redemption. It is that, as we shall see, but we must not rush there too quickly. Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned us against cheap grace, against an understanding that presumes upon God's grace, that presupposes forgiveness in such a way as to take it for granted and to make light of sin. The full weight of the judgment of God which Genesis 3 sets forth at some length must be taken in all seriousness: the loss of innocence, the incurring of guilt, the fall from grace, the loss of communion with God, the fear, the shame, the consequential curse, the sentence of death, the expulsion from the garden. And sin having entered God's good creation continues to have tragic consequences. Murder occurs in the very next generation, and in each of the following

chapters of Genesis up through the 11th, sin abounds more and more, as does God's judgment, as seen finally in the story of the flood.

And even this 15th verse of chapter 3 begins on a harsh note. God speaks to the wily serpent: "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed." Wrote Helmut Frey, "The woman once opened the doors to the dark power, and now as a penalty the doors are always to remain open and man is daily to be exposed to attack by that power which he now knows makes him terribly wretched." Even after the coming of Christ St. Peter would warn his followers: "Be sober, be vigilant: because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walks about, seeking whom he may devour" (I Pet: 5:8). And St. Paul would conclude his Epistle to the Ephesians with this strong admonition: "Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armour of God that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Eph. 6:10-12). (As an aside I would commend to you the powerful novel by Michael D. O'Brien entitled *Father Elijah: An Apocalypse*, published by Ignatius Press, which deals quite convincingly with the power of evil.)

But back to Genesis 3:15. God is speaking to the serpent: "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed;—and it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel." Martin Luther commented here,

Moreover, this, too, ought to be noted . . . : that these words are not spoken by God for the devil's sake. God does not regard him worthy of His condemnation, ... [I]t is enough that his own conscience condemns Satan. These words are spoken for the sake of Adam and Eve that they may hear this judgment and be comforted by the realization that God is the enemy of that being which inflicted so severe a wound on man. Here grace and mercy begin to shine forth from the midst of the wrath which sin and disobedience aroused. Here in the midst of most serious threats the Father reveals His heart; this is not a father who is so angry that he would turn out his son because of his sin, but one who points to a deliverance, indeed one who promises victory against the enemy that deceived and conquered human nature.

The wording of Genesis 3:15, like the wording of much prophecy, is intriguing in its precision. We are sometimes so amazed at the specificity of prophecy that we are not always sure how much we read *in* the prophecy or how much we read *into* it. But

remember the inspiration of God's Holy Spirit lies behind the hand of the author. "The seed of the woman," it says—not the seed of the man, which one might have expected, Adam being the progenitor of the human race. But it says, '*the seed of the woman.*' How can we fail to see there a mysterious reference to the one who would be born of a virgin—the one St. Paul referred to strangely, uniquely, as the one "born of a woman," though we all come from a woman's womb?

"The seed of the woman shall bruise thy head and thou shalt bruise his heel." This speaks of a mighty conflict. After man's sin, all creation, far from experiencing the Shalom God intended, was filled with conflict—"Nature red in tooth and claw." But the greatest conflict would be that which God himself would wage with his archenemy for the sake of the sinful offspring he had made in his own image. The eternal Word would become *flesh*, God would become *man*. In the very nature of man, he would submit to that wilderness testing at the hand of Satan, of which we always read on the first Sunday of Lent. He would be tempted in all points as we are, as Adam was, and yet be without sin.

The seed of the woman would enter into deadly conflict with all the powers of deception, death and darkness for the sake of the soul of man, and would prevail, as the Orthodox love to sing throughout Eastertide, "Trampling down death by death and restoring life to those in the tomb." The seed of the serpent would bruise the heel of the seed of the woman, a terrible wound to be sure, but not a fatal one. He would bruise him in his humanity but not in his deity. He would kill the body, but not the divine life within. Many of the early Church Fathers, spoke of Satan as being tricked, killing Christ the man and thinking he had won, not recognizing the underlying deity.

The seed of the serpent would bruise the *heel* of the seed of the woman, but the seed of the woman, the virgin born, sweet Mary's Son, would bruise the serpent's *head*. The former is a wound; the latter a fatal blow. Luther wrote, "But see how uneven the outcome of the battle is. The human being's heel is in danger, but his head is uninjured and undefeated. On the other hand, it is not the tail and not the belly of the serpent but the head itself that is to be crushed and trodden underfoot by the seed of woman." He continues a little later:

This first comfort, this source of all mercy and fountainhead of all promises, our first parents and their descendants learned with the utmost care. They say that without this promise procreation would indeed continue to go on among people as well as among the other living beings, but that it would be nothing else than a procreation to death. And so that gift which was given by God to our nature is here made greater, nay, even made sacred; for there is hope of a procreation through which the head of Satan would be crushed, not only to break his tyranny but also to gain eternal life for our nature, which was surrendered to death because of sin. For here Moses [the author] is no longer dealing with a natural serpent; he is speaking of the devil, whose head is death and sin. Therefore when his power has been crushed, that is, when sin and death have been destroyed by Christ, what is there to prevent us children of God from being saved?

In this manner Adam and Eve understood this text. Their consolation against sin and despair was their hope for this crushing, which was to be brought about in the future through Christ. And through the hope based on this promise they will also rise up to eternal life on the Last Day.

Such, my friends, is the *proto-evangelium*, the first promise of our redemption.

Of the fulfilling of that promise John Henry Newman wrote better than anyone:

O loving wisdom of our God!
 When all was sin and shame,
 A second Adam to the fight
 And to the rescue came.

O wisest love! that flesh and blood
 Which did in Adam fail,
 Should strive afresh against their foe,
 Should strive and should prevail;

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