

Sunday 26 February 2023.

WHO WILL YOU LISTEN TO?

Scripture: Genesis 3:1–7 and Matthew 4:1–11

Today is the first Sunday of Lent.

We are in the countdown to final days of Jesus and now there are less than 40 days before we will commemorate that day when Jesus gave up His life so that we who have accepted Him into our hearts, repenting of our sins could have eternal life.

Our first reading today has taken us back to why God sent His Son to us. It takes us back to the first sinning, back to the Garden of Eden, to a time when all was well in the world.

Although, not quite, for there was already evil in the world. There was Satan, also known as Lucifer.

Who was he?

It is said that he was a very handsome angel, too handsome, for it went to his head and he tried to rebel against God. For that Satan, or Lucifer, was expelled from heaven, along with those who supported him. We would hear about them millennia later as Jesus confronted them. Do you recall the story of the Gadarene swine when Jesus sent a legion of demons into a herd of pigs?

We read in the earlier chapters of Genesis that God made Adam and Eve in His own spiritual image and gave them dominion over all the other creatures He had made.

That did not sit well with Satan who wanted dominion over Adam and Eve, to seduce them away from God, and he succeeded.

Satan is subtle and insinuating. Have you noted that the word sin is part of the longer word insinuating?



Clad as a serpent, a snake, Satan sidled up to Adam and Eve and slipped a question into their minds and they listened. Satan spoke to Eve but Adam was near and remained silent. He could have spoken but he remained silent.

There are times when people must speak out, however they do not and the consequences of silence can be devastating. They certainly were for Adam and Eve, and for humankind.

The devastation continues today. We only have to watch the news each day.

By listening to Satan, and heeding him, Adam and Eve brought death into the world, and it would be one of their sons who would commit the first murder recorded in the Bible when Cain killed Abel, his own brother. Many, many more murders would follow, and still do today.

Satan tempted Adam and Eve by telling them they would Be like God, knowing good and evil.

So, a question – Does anyone here, or online, feel that they are a better person, or wiser, by knowing about good and evil? Perhaps wiser, with the benefit of hindsight if evil has damaged their lives, but do they feel good about?

I am speaking from hindsight here,

I was scammed badly last year and, although I was fortunate to receive a goodly portion of it back, I don't feel good about it. Perhaps wiser, but not good. Wisdom from hindsight does leave a sense of distaste within you.

In Proverbs 3:11, it is stated,

“Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding.”

Adam and Eve certainly found wisdom and gained understanding but at what a cost! They were expelled from the presence of God which meant the Garden of Eden. They were doomed to pain and toil. They were doomed to one day die.

Adam and Eve were sent into exile. Humankind was sent into exile and we are still in exile yet not all is lost.

Satan did gain a victory yet it was, and still is, the victory of a loser. God remains in charge over all. He remains in judgment. His judgment can be harsh however it is not without mercy. What God wants is the redemption of humankind. For that reason He sent us Jesus for as, is written in John 3:16–17:

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

But that was millennia away, and Satan would challenge and challenge, determined to seduce all humankind to worship him instead of God. There would be successes.

The story of Noah and the Ark is one such story however there were still eight people, Noah, his sons and their wives, who were good and were saved by God to repopulate the world.

Then came the Tower of Babel when humankind decided to build a staircase to heaven. So was broken up humankind into the tribes, and languages and nations, often in conflict. And that, conflict, we still see today.

Then came Sodom and Gomorrah, two towns whose people were so sinful, that God destroyed them, and only three people were saved – Lot and his daughters. Four were to be spared, however Lot's wife looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt.

Lesson – do not look back at evil for it can seduce you again. As is written in Luke 11:24–26:

²⁴ "When an impure spirit comes out of a person, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.' ²⁵ When it arrives, it finds the house swept clean and put in

order. ²⁶ Then it goes and takes seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that person is worse than the first.”

Yet, unknown to the world, back at the time of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, God had acted. He watches us always, seeking those He will get to act for Him and open doors for those He chooses to undertake tasks for Him.

So it was, now at least 4,000 years ago.

God chose a good man, one who believed that there was only one God. He chose a man named Abram to be the conduit that would enable Him to redeem humankind. From Abram, whom God renamed Abraham would come, around 2,000 years after the choosing of Abram, a child, conceived by a young woman whose name was Mary.

That child was Jesus. To the world who knew the child, Jesus, He was the son of Mary and Joseph, a carpenter, just a tradie who raised another tradie. But, as Mary and Joseph, His earthly stepfather, knew Jesus was much more. What that was exactly remained a mystery.

But the child had to become a man, and in those times, among the Hebrews, that was when a man reached the age of 30.

The time came.

There appeared in Palestine a powerful preacher whose name was John and who became known as John the Baptist. He was cousin to Jesus, born by Elizabeth, wife of Zechariah, a priest in the Temple, and a woman who was, seemingly, too old to conceive a child. Yet, by God's grace, she did.

John came preaching repentance and, it came to pass, that among those who sought the baptism of repentance, that his cousin, Jesus, approached him to be baptised. This may be considered odd, given who Jesus was, and is, but it was necessary, as Jesus was not yet recognised for who He was – and would not fully be so recognised until his death on the Cross and His resurrection.

That day, it is recorded, a dove descended, and God recognised Jesus as His Son.

In sending Jesus, God finally set in place the means for the redemption of humankind. It took a very long time, and that may puzzle many people.

It was around 2,000 years since God had chosen Abraham, one man to be the father of nations. Abraham fathered Isaac who fathered two children, one of whom was Jacob who fathered the twelve sons whose offspring would form the twelve tribes of Israel. The Bible tells of the relocation of Jacob and his family to Egypt however their number was only about 70.

The Book of Exodus tells on the slavery of the descendants of Jacob for over 400 years by which time, their numbers may have grown to around a million men, women and children, enough to found a nation. Which ultimately happened however not without many birthing pains which included rebellion against God. Such could not occur without punishment. The nation that God wanted to create failed to survive due to the repeated rebellion and sinning of the people – and all was encouraged by Satan.

There came a time when the Hebrews came to be true to God, rejecting idols however there arose among the people those who saw their role to be the controllers and social judges within their society. They became known as Pharisees. As a result over 600 laws were passed designed to control the behaviour of the Hebrew people.

Satan loves control. It gives him power.

It is different with God. Humankind has been given free will. We are free to choose to follow Jesus or free to reject Him. With Satan there is no choice. Choosing Satan is to choose slavery to him.

This is what Satan wanted from Jesus when, after his cousin, John, had baptised Him. Jesus went into the wilderness.

All of us have had wilderness in our lives, whether we have followed Jesus Christ from a young age or come to accept Him in our lives much later. As we read in 1 Peter 5: 8-9 –

⁸ Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.

For Jesus, the wilderness was physical and it would have been psychological. He fasted for 40 days and 40 nights. He was the Son of God however He was still human. He would have been hungry. He would have been dirty for there would have been limited place for Him to wash.

All the time that Jesus was in the wilderness He would have been watched by Satan who finally pounced.

Satan challenged the hungry Jesus to turn stones into bread. Jesus responded that the word of God is what sustains humankind.

Satan's next challenge was for Jesus to attempt to commit suicide for throwing Himself from a high place could have resulted in His death, if God had not acted. This was a challenge to God to act before His time. God's plan was still in progress. Satan would not have known what God planned. No one does however Satan will try any ploy to damage God's plans.

Finally Satan offered Jesus the world, a promise that, no doubt, he believed he had the power to offer. It was, as Jesus said, a test of God.

We are God's creation. He is our Creator. We exist because of Him. He has control over all of us and of our lives but, again, it is up to each of us to accept God and Jesus into our lives.

It is not easy. There are so many temptations in the world.

Jesus was sent by God, His Father, for a specific reason – to be the recipient of all our sins and to die so that we can be saved, if only

we would seek repentance. That specific reason was achieved with the death and resurrection of Jesus and, in that act of sacrifice, Satan lost.

Yet, until the return of Jesus, as revealed in the Book of Revelation, Satan remains active in the world, fighting a rearguard action.

How does Satan do this?

He instills doubt in us – leading us to question God’s Word and His goodness.

He discourages us, making us look at our problems rather than at God.

He diverts us by making wrong things seem attractive so that we want them more than the right things.

He seeks to defeat us by making us feel a failure so that we do not try to achieve.

He delays us so that we put off doing something so that it never gets done.

So, a question, how many of these five things can you relate to personally?

I can, with all of them at various stages in my life.

We who follow Jesus Christ will never be exempt from attacks from Satan until Jesus returns in judgment.

Jesus said, as recorded in Matthew 16:24:

²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

Yet, we should not be discouraged as Jesus said in Matthew 28:18–20:

¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

When the end of the age will be, only God knows. Until then, we who follow Jesus Christ must do all in our power to resist Satan. It is not easy to do so for what Satan offers can be very attractive.

So, who will you listen to?

We must pray for strength to resist the wiles of Satan.

We must pray for God’s help and guidance when such times occur in our lives.

We must pray for wisdom and discernment to understand any messages we are sent by God.

I will end with prayer.

*All-powerful God,
in Jesus Christ you turned death into life,
and defeat into victory:
increase our faith and trust in Him,
that we may triumph over evil,
in the strength of the same Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, forever and ever.*

Amen