

May I speak in the name of God, Giver, Forgiver and Lover. Amen.

Today we hear two stories of temptation, the story of the serpent tempting Eve and the story of the devil tempting Jesus. They are beautifully asymmetrical stories with Jesus resisting temptation just as firmly as Eve gives in. However, as the proud father of a newborn baby girl, I have to admit that I am not a little uncomfortable with the traditional interpretations given to the first temptation story. For a long while now the church has interpreted this story as a story of disobedience, a disobedience that creates original sin.

But I have to say to you that when I look at our baby Beatrix, as when I look at my other daughter Lyra, I am not particularly convinced of the empirical reality of original sin. The doctrine of original sin as conceived famously by St Augustine proclaims that the act of procreation passes on sin from generation to generation. And until the washing of baptism there is literally no health in us miserable offenders. Now I don't know about you, but flush with the rediscovered joys of parenthood, personally I find that account less than convincing.

Looking more closely at the story of the temptation of Eve it is possible to read this story in more than one way. Other contemporary theologians share my disquiet about the traditional original sin reading of Augustine. And they have drawn our eyes once more to the question of who the serpent really is. If the serpent is a stand in for the

devil, they ask, then why doesn't the bible simply say so. But as the story stands, the serpent must be one of the creatures that God has made. And if that is so, maybe the serpent is doing God's will in making Adam and Eve reflect about the limits of their humanity? To be sure, the serpent appeals to a certain hubris. But isn't the serpent also fundamentally arguing for a kind of intellectual curiosity that is one of our greatest gifts?

Whether or not you agree with that reading, I think it is fair to say that the Christian world is today split about how the story of Eve is read. While the traditional reading is still dominant, others argue that the story can be honestly reinterpreted. To reinterpret the story would be to redeem Eve and make her a heroic figure, the one responsible for expanding the limits of human knowledge. And it would be to reframe the story of original sin into a story of original blessing.

The same cannot be made with the story of the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness. But that is not to say that both stories do not inspire a common exegetical sophistication. Just as the story of Eve can be read in more than one way, so the temptation of Jesus by the devil is actually all about the way we read scripture in different ways.

In the encounter with the devil, Jesus has to reframe the scriptural quotes that the devil plucks out to tempt him. It is a wonderful exchange, in which the devil needs to be given due credit. According to Matthew, the devil knows

scripture really well. In fact the devil is a quite traditional and literal reader of scripture. By contrast, Jesus sees beyond the surface of the diabolical tempting. Jesus parries the devil not by answering the questions, but by reframing the debate with appeal to other parts of the scriptures. If ever one was needed, this encounter is a reminder of the pluralism within the scriptures. The scriptures have no single voice, and there are competing interpretations.

When the Archbishop of Canterbury got into trouble earlier this week for thinking about the relation of English law to Islamic law, I believe he was making a similar point. Like the scriptures, our societies are pluralistic. The values that were unquestioningly held by signers of Magna Carta or the Declaration of Independence are simply no longer the values held unquestioningly by all in either the UK or the US. And just as the scriptures admit varying levels of interpretation, so today we live in societies where no one religious or secular mindset holds true for all people.

At the start of Lent, I believe that one of the temptations we need to resist is the idea that there is a single, clear and universal set of values by which all should live. That idea is the founding ideal of Enlightenment thinking and has brought many benefits in enshrining legal equality of all people that I for one would not want to lose. But it is also an idea that has also given us the horrors of Stalinism, Maoism, fascism and other totalitarian ideologies that promote uniformity of thought and action.

When Rowan Williams suggested that English law rethink the way it relates to the Islamic community in England, he was suggesting that law should not be seen as a monolithic and unchanging system. Rather, the law should be seen for what it is, a cultural production that needs to be related to the communities within which it is practiced. Already in England there are Jewish courts, the Beth Din, that judge property and marital questions when both parties consent. And of course in this country and in Canada the law recognizes native American jurisdictions should be allowed to operate under different legal frameworks that honor the cultural and religious beliefs of native Americans.

The irony is, of course, that the Archbishop is taking his lead from Jesus when the devil shows him the kingdoms of the world and offers them to Jesus. Like Jesus the Archbishop is suggesting a renunciation of power and domination. And that is unsettling to both his religious and secular critics who desire order and control.

We discover a very different kind of church leader in Dostoevsky's 'Grand Inquisitor'. There the Cardinal Grand Inquisitor has arrested Jesus - because the Cardinal loves humanity. He loves humanity so much that he wants to protect humanity from the freedom that is offered by Jesus. Instead the Cardinal wants humans to enjoy the illusion of security. Referring to the temptation story of this morning's gospel he says to Jesus: "Had you accepted the world and Caesar's purple, you would have

founded a universal kingdom and granted universal peace.” [But you did not] “...And so we took Caesar’s sword, and in taking it, of course, we rejected you and followed *him*.” In case you are in any doubt, the *him* to whom the Cardinal is referring is the devil. The honest yet fictitious Cardinal represents a mindset in which the beneficent desire for security and harmony transforms the church into an authoritarian institution.

Today I hope we don’t need to review why we too must disagree with the Cardinal. But there are still insidious ways in which we make accommodations with the natural desire for security. But during Lent we are asked to remember that God created us as free agents. Free to be disobedient. But also free to love. Where we or our society are coercive of others, even if that coercion is for the sake of security or even love, then to be sure we disobey God however well intentioned our motivations might be.

As Christians our duty is to fight for the freedom of others to worship and believe differently to us. Just as a church we embrace disagreements within the community of faith about how we read scripture: so, too, we must allow for mutually contradictory accounts of what it is to be human in our social and political life.

I want to end with a story about the Baka pygmies of tropical Cameroon. For decades their hunting grounds and sacred trees have been destroyed by ruthless logging companies. And for decades the pygmies had no

recourse to legal remedies. They are a non literate culture and they cannot prove through written records ownership of their lands. All this changed recently when they were given hand held GPS devices with which to log the sacred sites and locations of food. They still cannot write. But they can identify pictograms. And through the GPS devices they can prove their ownership against illegal incursions.

The Cameroon pygmies are a good example of positive change in which a dominant culture transforms its legal system to better serve a minority community. In the same way, this Lent those of us as Christians living in cultures that are predominantly Christian need to be aware of the needs of minority belief systems. Like Christ we need to resist the temptation to know what is good for others and force them to enjoy our version of the good. Clearly this letting the other be really other also applies to our familial and collegial relationships as much as broader social networks. God asks us to embrace the wonderful diversity and pluralism of our planet with love for all its people. And whatever you believe about original sin that love for all people without exception is truly God’s original blessing. Amen.