



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

May I speak to you in the name of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Perhaps I should begin by, in case there are any of you who are wondering who this strange, bald-headed Brit in the pulpit is, that I've been very graciously invited by Father Bill and Father Chris, to share with you for a week, which I'm very honored to do and to be with you. So that's sort of who I am.

And here we are on the Mother's Day weekend. Mother's Day Sunday. It's actually the second Mother's Day I've had this year because, The Church of England, as it happens, celebrates Mother's Day on the middle Sunday of Lent, whereas we, as I remember from my days living here, celebrate it now. I must say we do have one advantage because it always seems to me that the scriptures that we have on the middle Sunday of Lent aren't a lot to do with mothers. Whereas we have texts today, which very obviously are, and it's on those that I'd like to reflect with you for a few minutes.

First of all, our Old Testament reading about Eve, who is actually described, as we heard, she's called Eve because she's the mother of all living. So I guess if that doesn't qualify you for a mention on Mother's Day, I don't know what would. Eve, of course, comes in those creation stories at the beginning of the Bible, and if I were asked to name one of Satan's solid achievements over the last two or three centuries, I would say that he's managed to succeed mostly in getting us not to listen to these stories for what they actually are about.

He's got us engaged a good deal of our time in fatuous discussions about whether they contradict what Darwin found out about evolution, or whether Darwin contradicts them or whatever. Concerns, which I think are about as remote from the concerns of the storytellers who originally told these stories as differential calculus from my dog's mind at suppertime.

And that's a shame because these are wonderful stories. Great literary critic, George Steiner said, "No stupid literature, art, or music lasts." And I'm quite sure he's right. And if he is, then these stories must be very great indeed because they've been gone on being told for thousands of years, literally thousands of years. And what is it about them that makes them so good? I'd say it's that they are true to the human heart. They fit our human experience.

So what then of Adam and Eve? What we had this morning, of course, is only the first half of the story that Genesis gives us. It's before the business with the apple

and the serpent and everything all going completely wrong. It's about a time before that. It's a vision, if you like, of a world in which wickedness has not yet come. A world which is actually functioning the way God wants it to be. And what's it like? Well, in the great words of Louis Armstrong, it's a wonderful world. It's an exciting, it's a colorful world. It's full of fantastic creatures and amazing plants and exciting things to do.

It's quite different from other stories. There are other stories of creation that come from the ancient near East, from places not far from Israel, countries around her. The epic of Gilgamesh, which describes the gods creating the world. But they're completely different in spirit because in those epics, man is just - humanity is just a play thing of the gods. Just a sort of odd thing that happens to be there. But in our story, in Israel's story, in the church's story, God cares for what God has created and talks to us. And carefully sets us in the midst of this glorious world and actually gives us a chance to make ourselves useful in it. It is nice to have a chance to make yourself useful. That's why I'm so glad you asked me. But the Hebrew word actually almost means that humanity is there to serve the world. To serve the planet in all the things that we can do.

And what's more, God says all the possibilities of this world are yours for the taking. The story puts it, all the fruits of all the trees of the garden, you may eat freely - freely, much as you like. There's no room for aestheticism here. People on a diet really need not apply. But there is one limitation and it applies to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Now what's that mean? We're not to eat of that. And in the day that you eat of it says, God, you shall die. Or as the Hebrew I think might be more precisely translated, you will be doomed to die.

What's so special about that tree? What's meant by good and evil here? Well, I think it's an example of what literate grammarians call merismus, whereby you speak of two extremes in order to describe a whole. Like you say, they search the ship from stem to stern, meaning they searched the whole ship, or we looked high and low, meaning we looked everywhere. Good and evil is a way of saying everything. If you know good and evil, you know everything. And we have actually other examples in ancient Greek literature. I can't think of any in Hebrew, in the Odyssey, there are points where that expression is precisely used to say, you know everything.

But who of course really knows everything? Well, evidently only God. And so the command being given to humankind here is really quite straightforward. You may eat of all the trees in the garden where I've planted you and everything, in other words, every possibility that's open to humanity is yours. Go for it. But do not attempt to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which is to say, do not attempt to be God, because in the day you do that, it'll kill you.

This is not, of course, a prohibition in any negative sense. It's no more or less than a kind of warning, which any good parent gives to a child. You know, hot coffee can scald you. Stinging nettles will sting. Poison ivy is actually poisonous so be careful. Don't do it. Don't touch them. And if you try to be God, it will kill you. And it seems to me that the 2 or 3000 years of history we've had, since this story was first told, have only gone to prove that that's true. When we try to be as god's, we kill ourselves and we kill everybody else if we're not careful.

But there's more than that. God also says it's not good for Adam to be alone. I remember the old group dynamics. We did group dynamics. It was ever such a new thing when I did it. And it said you can't be human alone was one of the great key words. And of course, nobody is alone or meant to be according to our Christian revelation. Even the one God within the depths of the divine being, enjoys relationship in the fellowship of the triune God. And as for the animals, I remember, because I'm a very doggy sort of person, I was a bit shocked the first time I read in a book about dogs years ago, and whoever it was writing it, she said our dogs do love us. Of course they do. They love us quite a lot, but we always need to remember that what they like best of all is the company of other dogs. Well, I was quite shocked by this to think my dog preferred other dogs to me. But of course when you think about it, of course it's just common sense. Naturally, dogs want other dogs. It's what they're made for.

And God says the same about the Adam. Adam has fellowship with God and he has fellowship with all the creatures. He even gets to name them. But even so, something else is needed. Or as the storyteller puts it, there was not found for him a suitable helpmate to be a partner. So what's needed? Well, of course, what's needed is another human being. What the Cockneys, and I am very proud to be a Cockney, would describe, he needs a little pal. And what God does is give him a little pal.

And we have the wonderful story of the sleep and the rib and Adam's awakening, and then the ecstatic cry. She at last. Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh. Woman. It's the first love poem and it's absolutely beautiful. However, I think we need to be careful to avoid two mistakes in thinking about this story, and I've certainly come across them. One is the suggestion I've heard sometimes that because the woman is kind of made from the man, she's just a kind of appendix and not really very important. She's kind of there to be the assistant to the CEO.

This, of course, is simply nonsense. And you can show it's simply nonsense in a very easy way by just showing you can turn the whole thing on its head. You might just as well say, well, Adam is created from the whole earth, from the dust of the earth to be sovereign and the jewel of creation in a sense. So in fact, then

woman must be created from Adam to be the sovereign and the jewel of humanity. So you can put the whole thing the other way around.

The other thing is we ought not misunderstand the word helper, ezer. That's a Hebrew word. Ezer describes what someone does. It does not describe their position in a hierarchy. As I said again, Eve is not assistant to the CEO. Helper simply means she helps. And there is no question of rank here. There are points in scriptures, and you can look at Psalm 33 or Psalm 70, if you don't believe me, where the Almighty God is described as Israel's helper. So what the word tells us is what she does, that's all. It doesn't imply a pecking order or any kind of superiority or inferiority.

And in fact, the mere fact that I've touched on those ideas shows that I'm already a mind at least moving into the second part of the story, to what happens when evil enters the world after Adam's and Eve's disobedience, because in the beginning, such ideas have no part of this relationship. The relationship between Adam and Eve in the beginning is what the New Testament calls koinonia. Its fellowship. It's an openness. It's above all about the wonder of not being alone. And it's the assertion of that state of not being alone, of being open, of having someone you can trust and who will trust you that leads to the climax of this story in the wonderful sentence, the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed. When you can completely trust each other, when you are with someone you can completely trust, then you can afford to show them who you are. And perhaps, maybe God's greatest gift to us in some ways, at least in our humanity, is that we can say to someone, I love you, and they say, I love you back. And that fellowship of joy, that's the setting in God's vision into which children are to be born. And this is God's vision of motherhood, as Genesis storyteller has it.

Now, of course we all know, and as those who handed on these stories knew perfectly well in our naughty world, motherhood and fatherhood and family life is not always like that. And for some it isn't even close. And as a reminder that they knew that, always remember that the same storytellers in Genesis who give us this wonderful vision, also give us the stories of Abraham and Isaac and the patriarchs and Sarah and Rebecca and the quarrels. I mean, it's a great tribute to Israel's honesty actually, that she pandered on these stories of her founding fathers and mothers with their quarrels and rows and deceits and deceiving. The phrase dysfunctional family might have been designed to describe the patriarchs.

So they're quite realistic. But nevertheless, the storyteller does present us with this wonderful picture of Eve and Adam before the fall, as the vision and the ideal. And those of us who've been blessed enough, and I count myself as one of them, to have had any such experience of our mothers, as our mothers are

always willing to be our helpers, as our mothers as being the one who helped to create a nurturing community in which we could feel free to be ourselves, free to grow and free to live. If we've had any such experience with our mothers, or indeed with anyone else who's played the role of a mother in our lives for us, then this is a day to thank God for that and for all that they've been to us.

But I have said – sorry, I'm not quite finished yet. I have said there are two mothers in this – at least I think I said it. There are two mothers in this morning's gospel, this morning's Bible readings, and of course the other one is Mary of Nazareth. I trust, you know her story well enough. What we had this morning is the section after she's accepted, she'd accepted the risky assignment of becoming Mother of the Messiah, and if you're not sure why it's risky, ask me afterwards and I'll tell you.

After that, she's this plucky girl, sets off on a track over about 175 kilometers of maintenance territory, presumably without any of her male kin. I trust as a respectable young woman, that Luke would have assumed she had some kind of attendants. But it is interesting he doesn't mention Joseph or any other of her kin, which he would've certainly mentioned if he thought they were there. She sets off over the mountains to go and see her elderly cousin Elizabeth, on the word of the angel. And when she arrives, you may have noticed Luke says, Elizabeth responds to her full of the Holy Spirit, which is Luke's way of saying what she said is true and you better believe it.

And her cousin Elizabeth calls her “blessed.” Of course, blessed because she is to be mother of the Messiah. But Elizabeth also says something else. She says, blessed are you because you believed, because you trusted. She speaks of Mary as someone in her own right who's fought her own battle, done her own struggle, come to her own faith. And this is something she's done not only apart from, but in a sense, even as a condition of her becoming the mother of Jesus, the mother of the Messiah. And I think this is important, even in distinction from what we've just said about motherhood because it recognizes that Mary is also a woman in her own right, a person in her own right, who has already had her own battles to fight and her own decisions to make.

And Luke brings this home to us even more a little bit later in the story, in something we didn't have in our reading this morning, in what we celebrate, the feast we call The Presentation, when Mary and Joseph bring our Lord Jesus, baby Jesus to the temple to present Him. And if you remember the story, you'll remember there's an old man there called Simeon, and Luke says, Simeon too says, Luke is full of the Holy Spirit and he takes the child Jesus. Precisely, I think, Mary hands Him to her, is the implication of the Greek. Hands Jesus to Simeon and Simeon first talks about Jesus, he says, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel.

And then he turns, he's very specific. He says to Mary, "And a sword shall pierce through your own soul also." All these wonderful things that Jesus is going to do, Mary, His mother, will also have to suffer through them. And no doubt she did suffer. Suffered seeing her son reviled by the religious establishment, suffered at the last seeing Him crucified. And yet she seems to have remained quietly, faithful through it all and it's very striking that at the end of it all, as we heard in our second reading this morning, after the resurrection and after everything, we see her, she's in the upper room sitting with the disciples saying her prayers, asking for nothing special for herself, just claiming nothing except that she is still too a member of Jesus' family.

And I'm emphasizing this aspect of Mary precisely because for those of us who've been blessed enough to have a mother who has been our helper and the creator and the nurture, all the things we talked about in reference to Eve, for us, there is a temptation to see our mothers as nothing but that. They're just sort of there for us all the time, and to forget that they do in fact exist also in their own right apart from whatever they are for us.

We've been having, as you can imagine, in Britain, a great deal about King Charles on television over the last few days, which is fine by me. I'm a royalist. I love it all, so it's okay. But I was very struck. There was one program about his being a young man and a boy and so on, where he's talking to himself and he says something like, it wasn't until he was about 12 years old that he realized his mother was important to some people, not because she was his mother. And for heaven's sake, his mother was Queen of England. You think he might have noticed. And he's not an insensitive lad, let's be fair to him. So if he didn't notice, there's perhaps some forgiveness for the rest of us, if we might omit to notice that our mothers have other roles in life than what they are to us.

Our mothers are their own persons unique in God's eyes with their own place and meaning. And often they are also those who suffered for us in some way or other. We caused it perhaps intentionally or not. If you'll forgive me one personal reminiscence, I'm struck by the fact that when I was very little, which was during the World War II, and we had rationing in Britain. I think we had two eggs a week for everybody. And I remember my mother saying to me she didn't like eggs so she'd rather I ate them. So of course I did. I liked eggs.

And it wasn't until after the war and then I think I vaguely remember being a bit surprised that when we had as many eggs as we liked, she seemed to eat her eggs with everybody else. I thought, oh, she must have got to like eggs. Clot, dolt that I was, it wasn't until I was about, Heaven knows, 35 or something it suddenly dawned on me that, of course, my mother gave up her eggs so that I would have it. Well, you might say that was a small thing, but I'm sure it was a

sign of many other things that our mothers, all of them, give up for the sake of us.

So to sum up, my landlady, the first landlady I had when I was a curate, she always said, I want my thought for the day for a sermon. Well, I've got two thoughts for the day in this one. One thought for the day is, by all means, let us pray and thank God for all that our mothers, or those who've played a mother's role in our life, have been to us in supporting and nurturing us and helping us. And on the other hand, let us also pray to God for those people knowing that they have their own roles, their own struggles, and that there are lots and lots of things to God besides being just motherly to us. And now to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, we ascribe as is most justly due, all might, majesty, dominion, and power, now, henceforth, and forever.

Amen.