

The second garden

The second chapter of the book of Genesis tells us that Eden was a wonderful place, and the man and the woman lived there, and they walked in the garden with God. Until things went wrong.

The serpent tempted them with the chance to be 'like God', just by eating the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The tree, the one tree, that God had warned them not to eat from.

They made a choice. And they made the wrong choice. And they were cut off from the garden.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

Throughout the Old Testament we read the story of God's relationship with people. Sometimes people were on the right track and drew closer to God, sometimes things got really bad and the people called on God for help, and sometimes things got really good, and the people thought that God was not worth worrying about any more.

It was a hopeless cycle. People couldn't break it. But God could.

Our reading tonight takes us into a garden, not the garden of Eden, but the Garden of Gethsemane. But just like there was in Eden, there was temptation in Gethsemane, and a choice to be made.

Jesus had arrived triumphantly into the city of Jerusalem on Sunday, greeted by the waving palms and cries of 'hosanna' but by Thursday, it had all had changed.

Jesus gathered his disciples around him and celebrated the Passover meal, what was to become remembered as the Last Supper.

After the supper, Jesus went out to the Garden of Gethsemane on the slopes of the Mount of Olives and there he told his closest disciples to watch over him. But he soon found them sleeping, and told Peter to "Watch and pray that you will not fall into temptation".

We have to wonder what the temptation for the disciples would have been: things had been going downhill for them since they came into Jerusalem. Jesus had repeatedly told them that he would die. He told them that one of them would betray him. And that Peter, one of his three closest disciples would deny him.

So the temptations: to run. If Jesus was put to death, you'd think that the authorities next targets would be the disciples. So why not run? Go back to Galilee. Back to fishing. Or tax collecting or whatever.

Or maybe the temptation was to protect Jesus – either to hide him away, or fight for him.

Or maybe the temptation was the opposite – to give Jesus up, to guarantee their own safety.

The garden wasn't (and isn't) a large area, probably a bit smaller than our church property here, but when they arrived, Jesus left them – he went a stone's throw away: not far, but far enough not to be 'with them'. They probably could have heard him, they almost certainly could have seen him. But he had moved away from them.

And then Jesus faced his own temptation.

And it was the same temptation that Satan had offered him in the desert before his ministry began – the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And said to him "To you I will give all of this, if you worship me." (Lk 4:5-7)

That was the temptation: Rather than follow God's plan, take the quick path that the devil offered.

That night, in Gethsemane, the temptation loomed large again. Jesus doesn't want to die. "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me."

"God! Is there any other way?"

But Jesus resisted the temptation. "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."

Jesus knew he was going to die. He knew he was going to die tomorrow. The sense of dread and foreboding would have been near overwhelming.

We read in Hebrews (4:15) "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are-- yet was without sin."

Jesus faced many temptations throughout his life and ministry. The greatest temptation he faced came on the night he was betrayed and arrested. What did Jesus do as he faced this, his greatest temptation?

He struggled, he prayed, he cried, he shed sweat like drops of blood as he prayed but still Jesus took the cup and drank every drop - he pushed back against all the temptations of the world, and he was obedient to the end.

In the first garden, Eden, the man and the woman gave in to temptation, and the power of death entered the world.

In the second garden, Gethsemane, Jesus resisted temptation, and the power of death was broken.

And we can rejoice in that. And we should rejoice in that.

But there is more in this lesson for us.

Jesus told his disciples "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation."

We are his disciples, so we should pray that too.

But what are our temptations? And I don't mean the vast array of Easter chocolates that confront us at the moment - but what are the temptations of our hearts. The temptation to give up on church? Or even on Jesus? Every day we see people around us happily living their lives without Jesus. The temptation is to give up on loving others: charity begins at home, doesn't it? Why should we care about others?

I think those are the big temptations for us. Not just for us here today, but for all Christians living in modern times.

They're pretty big temptations, and we need to pray that we don't fall to them.

Whatever trial or temptation you might face tonight or tomorrow, or ever. Know that Jesus has been through a bigger one, and resisted, and know that he will be with you, and support you with love and comfort and peace through all the trials and temptations of your life. And he has been all the way through death, and into new life and he calls you to follow him.

Amen.