

Talk Number Three

We have spoiled God's good world



Louis Armstrong was right wasn't he? At least in part. It is a beautiful world! The world described for us at the end of the Bible story is a truly beautiful world. The world described for us by Mark in which Jesus dealt effectively with the ills that afflict and trouble us is a beautiful world. The world described in the opening chapters of the Bible is also a beautiful world. We have seen that the world in which we all live was made by God. And we have seen that he made it good. Thankfully, this beautiful world is neither imprisoned totally in the past nor dispatched entirely to the future, because we still see much in the world that is good. You may have had the experience of looking at breathtaking scenery. You may have had the pleasure of someone showing you an extravagant kindness. Both of which reveal to us a good and beautiful world.

Paradoxically, we also know of great evil and many have endured severe pain in the form of the Holocaust or in the damage inflicted by a Tsunami. When you line these two realities of beauty and ugliness side by side, we are forced to ask: So what has gone wrong? The answer is stark, uncomfortable and maybe even surprising: we all have rejected God. We want to be god of our lives and so we ignore the true God.

In the West it is sometimes said that people behave in an anti-social way because of the environment in which they grew up. It is true that up-bringing is important. But the Bible says the problem is more fundamental than that. In many cultures the idea of shame is important. For some the key issue is not what you do but whether you get caught. But the Bible says the problem is more fundamental than that. People often think of criminals as bad people, but most of us are fairly respectable - not perfect for sure, but not too bad. But the Bible says we are all affected. The story of Adam and Eve shows us that we have *all* rejected God - and that is the real problem and the real explanation for this present world we live in.

Perhaps we wonder what the account of Adam and Eve has got to do with us. Even if it is true (which many people doubt) it happened a long time ago and a long way away. We assume it is irrelevant to us. But that view is just a little too convenient. Try reading Genesis 3 once more and not concerning yourself at this stage with questions of whether or not it is an historical account. Read it with a sense of honest self-assessment and do you not almost get a sense of *déjà vu*? In fact, do you not even find yourself thinking that the woman and man did the right thing! Who does God think he is telling them what to do? You see, in a very real sense, Adam and Eve are Mr and Mrs Everyone. They are you and me. What they did describes accurately what you and I do all the time. We want to be masters and mistresses of our own destiny. We want to run our own lives. We want to be the ones to decide what is right and wrong for us. The bottom line for all of us is that we think this is our world and we are God! You see it in the tantrum of a toddler, the surliness of an adolescent and the seething, repressed anger of an adult. In so many different ways we react badly because we want our own way because we labour under the delusion that this is *my* world.

Why are we like this? Why are we so self-obsessed? The Bible gives a clear and uncompromising answer: we are like this because of what this first man and woman did. They are our ancestors. They are us and we are them. We were present in them, as it were, because they were our representatives. At one level, this world we now live in is not the world we all want. Which is what we have been saying in each of our sessions so far. And the reason it is not the world we all want is because I contribute to its brokenness. Or maybe we should say that my contribution to the brokenness of this world is so significant that this broken world is the world I want? I have helped break it because I would rather have a broken world where I play God, than a beautiful world where I live under God's rule.

1. We have spoiled the world we all want

Look at Genesis 3:14-24. This is God's response to the rebellion of the first man and woman, which is the rebellion of all humankind. God says the world is now cursed (3:17-19). We have spoiled the world we all want. The Bible's account of the world explains why the world contains both good things and bad things. As we have seen in our world there is beauty, kindness and happiness. But we also see ugliness, evil and suffering. The Bible helps us to make sense of this paradox.

God made the world we all want with peace, abundance, blessing, life and harmony. But we have ruined it. We are self-centred and we do want our own way. Some years ago *The Times* newspaper ran a series of articles asking the question: what is wrong with the world. Many people contributed with all sorts of ideas. Then a well-known writer wrote a letter. In answer to the question as to what is wrong with the world, it simply said: *Dear Sir, I am. Yours truly, GK Chesterton.* We have spoiled the good world that God made. I spoil it on a daily basis with my selfishness and thoughtlessness.

2. We have become God's enemies

Our problem is not just that we have spoiled the world. We have become God's enemies. Our problem is not a poor up-bringing or bad karma. The Bible talks about it in specific terms: we have become God's enemies (3:22-24). By disobeying him, turning our back on him and rejecting him, we have taken the decision to be his enemies. The Bible always speaks in these black and white terms. We are either his friends or his enemies. There is no neutrality.

It is very important that we see the human predicament in these terms. People are often 'turned off' by any mention of sin. They immediately think of rule breaking, and sometimes that is quite an attractive image, particularly in many western cultures. Rule breakers such as James Dean the film star or Che Guevara the revolutionary are often cultural icons. But when the Bible refers to sin it is thinking of it primarily in relational terms. Imagine your favourite grandmother. What would she be like? She would love you and care for you. She would be the one you ran to when you fell over and grazed your knee. She would be the one whose knee you sat on to listen to stories, or whose apple pie you would eat with the best pastry in the world. Now imagine taking that grandmother to the top of a flight of stairs and pushing her down and laughing as she tumbles down and lies like a rag doll at the bottom. That is a better image of the nature of sin. That is a more accurate way of understanding what Adam and Eve did. They did not simply break a rule; they stabbed the most gracious and loving person they could ever know in the back. And we all do it!

Is it any wonder we are described as God's enemies? That is why we face the judgment of God. We face death. We face both physical death and spiritual death - separation from the goodness and love of God. Instead of the world we say we want, we get the world we deserve, a world of our own making - just as the first man and woman did.

The real reason we do not live in the world we all want is because we are not the people we want to be. We all sense that from time to time. Have you ever had someone tell you that they are disappointed in you? It is a very painful thing to hear. I know of a young man who still remembers vividly being told by his father that he was disappointed in him even though it happened many years ago. But for every time you may have disappointed someone, there will be many more times when you have disappointed yourself. You want to be a better person, but you find yourself repeating your failings. You are not the friend or the husband/wife or the son/daughter that you ought to be or you want to be. In short: you are not the person you ought to be. You are a rebel who rejects the God who made you. You have become God's enemy. We all have. We must all face the consequences.

This is not a popular view of ourselves. And it is not a popular view of God! But I have to realise that I am not as good as I like to think I am. I am not as good as other people think I am. And I also have to recognise that God is not some kind, cuddly old man who will smile indulgently and ignore what I have done. God is not like that. God is the sovereign Creator to whom I am answerable. And I have offended and hurt God by the way I have treated him and his word.

Isn't it ironic then that the world we all want is very similar to the world God first made? One year, in the February 14th issue of a national newspaper, there were messages 'posted' from one person to another. One of these Valentine's messages was particularly poignant. It was not from one lover to another, but from two children to their parents: *'The rebels failed; for our Utopia was the home we fought to leave.'* That is exactly how it is with the human race. We rejected the rule of God, stabbing him in the back and trampling all over his garden, but it turns out this was our Utopia! Instead of which we have ended up with a Dystopia of our own making. In the famous words of Hardy to Laurel: *This is another fine mess you've got us into!*

It would all be so depressing if it wasn't for the fact that we have seen how Jesus came to do something about this situation. We may not know how, but the Bible story is moving towards its climax and resolution and Jesus is an integral part of that. The hint of a solution comes in Genesis 3:15: bring on the Serpent Crusher!