

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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ADVENT 1 – THE PATTERN

29th November 2015

Genesis 3:8-13, 22-24

Matthew 1:1-6, 17

When I was growing up there was a saying which did the rounds – you saw it on posters and so on in schools and places where teenagers were encouraged to think. It read “History repeats itself. Has to. No one listens.” It is up to you to think and think and see if you agree with this! However, there is something else which repeats itself, and that is the Bible. And it repeats itself because for millennia no one was listening, and maybe they are still not listening. There are patterns which we need to listen to if we are to understand just what God is about, what the world is about, where our faith comes from and where it is going – what you might call the big things. And at this season of Advent it is important that we recognise the patterns, otherwise we will come to the conclusion that the Christmas story comes out of nowhere, that it is about a totally new departure in God's thinking, being and planning. And we will be wrong.

You might wonder why at the beginning of Advent we have turned to very nearly the beginning of the Bible. What has the coming of Jesus to do with the fall of Adam and Eve? But there are patterns, and patterns should be observed, or how can we properly understand the things which we think we know so well, things like the story of a baby in a manger?

So now that you are one the edge of your seat wondering what the pattern is, I will tell you. It is God intending to live among his people, being unable to because of their rebellion, but coming back in grace to do so at last. In a measure it is the story of the whole of the Old Testament, and the New.

We first meet it here at the very beginning. Whether you take Adam and Eve as literal or symbolic figures, the point of the story of Eden is this. It is to show how God wished to dwell with his people, so in this story we see God walking in their garden in the cool of the day. And it is to show how humanity threw away that incredible privilege because of – what? Because of curiosity, because of greed, because they listened to other voices, because they wanted to experience even more than God had given to them. In the end, whatever the various reasons, it was because of their rebellious hearts.

So let us look at the parts of the pattern. It begins with God. It begins with God intending to live among his people. Anyone who caricatures God as a remote being, far away, someone who set the world in motion and then withdrew, is simply wrong. They have never seen the pattern. God has always intended to be close to his people, to be with them, to accompany them in their lives, to share their joys and sorrow, to counsel them in perplexity, and celebrate with them in their triumphs.

God never wanted to be kept at arm's length, to be propitiated and worshipped in grudging terror. God wanted, wants to be close to his people. He made us and he wants to delight in us. That is true in a societal context as well as an individual one. God wants to be with his people as we live together, as we order our schools and rubbish collection and the dualling of the A9 and the defence of the realm and so on. Theologically John Calvin was quite correct when he tried to set up the city of Geneva to be an outpost of God's kingdom, with every little thing ordered in a way consistent with God's plans and revelation. Of course in practice it did not always work so well and the human problems associated with power rose up within the church leaders as they always seem to, whatever people are in charge.

God also wanted, wants to be with his people as individuals. God wants your company, and he wants mine. He wants to be involved in your life, in your decisions and your triumphs, in your sadness's and defeats. He simply wants to be with you. The pattern begins with God's desire.

But the pattern goes on to human rebellion which prevents God from dwelling among his people. We see this in what we read today about Adam and Eve and the serpent. By making us in his own image, by making us the kind of beings with whom God could want to spend his time, God also made us capable of choices and decisions. We are not and never were mere puppets. We can make choices and these choices will affect not only our lives but the life of the world. I have never been one of those Christians who believe that every one of our days is set in stone before we were born and that any choices we make are only seeming decisions. Nor do I believe that God is so small that should we break his patterns, set for the world or for our lives, then he is unable to mend them.

God is the great pattern-maker, and he weaves even our bad decisions, into his perfect purposes, when we bring them to him and acknowledge our faults. In Jesus' genealogy this morning we read of the birth of Perez and Zerah, the sons of Judah, by Tamar. The story of Judah and Tamar is definitely one of a man who makes a big mistake, a really bad decision. If we had read the whole of the genealogy of Jesus that Matthew records, we would have come to "the wife of Uriah" who was Solomon's mother – now that was a bad decision on David's part! But God has woven these and other mistakes into his pattern, into his tale of the world. And he can do the same for our mistakes, the errors we make as individuals, or as a church or as society. If we ask him.

Our rebellion means that God cannot live with us in the way that he intended. You can't live with someone who is constantly shutting the door in your face, doing things which they know will hurt and displease you, ignoring your presence. In our reading this morning we see Adam and Eve being put out of their garden, out into the world to fend for themselves. It is a harsh end to the story. All that lushness in Eden gives way to a bleaker landscape.

But that is not the end of the pattern. The pattern concludes with God coming back in grace to live with his people at last. The rest of the book of Genesis recounts how God does this in this first prototype of the pattern. It recounts how he is loved by Noah and is with him, and then how he chooses Abraham and journeys with him and his family in the pilgrimage of their lives.

That conclusion of the cycle is what we also find in our reading from the gospel. This is Advent when we look forward to the celebration of Jesus' coming, and the genealogy roots his coming firmly within the story of the descendants of Abraham. What God did at Christmas was not a complete new beginning, it was something rooted in what he had already done. It was a continuation of the pattern, it was taking the pattern forward, revealing it to a whole new audience.

The Christian Church has for centuries downplayed the Jewishness of Jesus, for reasons of ignorance or of wilful disassociating. When I was a student in Chicago I was a member of Morgan Park Presbyterian Church. There, as in many American Churches, there was adult Sunday School before the service. In one of these classes I remember an older man, one of the elders, who suddenly burst out – I forget in what context – “So you mean Jesus was a Jew! Oh well then that makes a lot more sense.” He has a life-time of church going behind him, but he had never made the connection between Jesus and Jewishness, because he had been told that Jesus was good, and he had also been told – probably not at church, specifically, but he had picked it up in his growing years, that Jewishness was suspect if not actually bad. And this is what the Christian church has done for a long time – tried to discreetly bury our Jewish roots; say that in Jesus God was doing a new thing (which he was, but not one that was disconnected from what he had already been doing); sometimes the church has even tried to blame the Jews for their part in God's pattern. Anti-Semitism, unfortunately, began with the Church.

But the Jewish people are definitely part of God's pattern. Coming alongside Abraham and his family was the first way that God finished the cycle of grace with his people, the way in which he first restored his presence within his creation.

God's presence, our rebellion, God's grace in restoring us, this is the pattern of God's dealing with us. As you think about the Christmas story, don't lose hold of that pattern. As you think and pray, as you use your advent devotionals, keep it in mind.

Keep it in mind too as you live out your own story, which is a part of God's larger story. Yes, you may be rebellious at times, you may make choices that push God out of your life, or try to keep him on only specific parts of your life. But God loves you and wants to be with you, he wants to share your life with you, in every single part of it. There is no rebellion that is beyond his redemption. In Jesus God has come to you in grace, which means in love that we don't deserve. In your advent waiting and preparing, the best thing you could do is to accept his love and welcome him anew into your life. Amen.

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