

No fall but a painful learning curve

Thanks, I suspect, to St Augustine (at least in respect of its elaboration and development) the Christian tradition has viewed Gen 2 as The Fall, a journey from naive innocence to depravity; the passion of Christ is the only way out of this swamp. Upon this the church has built a theology of guilt and shame, together with a theology of salvation that makes sense only against that background. I contend (and I am not alone) that another way of reading Gen 2 is as a journey from childhood innocence to mature responsibility in the face of (sometimes uncomfortable) reality, including reality about ourselves. Under this view the Passion takes on the form of a dramatic reminder of that underlying and truly persistent covenant of love.

The saga of four generations of one family, which occupies three quarters of Genesis, presents us with a view of humanity which is not very flattering. None of the characters in the story is wholly good, honest, holy; but equally, none of them is totally and irredeemably depraved. That's life; get used to it; it's a messy mixture. It would be interesting to ponder what view of God these stories unfold. One piece of evidence is the recurring theme of Covenant which underpins everything. The stories, the crises, the people, may all reflect a messy reality; but underlying it all is the covenant of steadfast love and tender mercy.

The prophets, too, seem to me to reflect aspects of both these approaches. They are a strange mixture of judgement and hope, reassurance and despair. Often they tell of the people's feelings, fears, reactions. The stories of how Israel/Judah came to be mixed up in geopolitics way beyond their powers of influence, especially the stories of Exile, represent the same messy reality, the same anguished feeling that God might no longer be on our side, but the same underlying covenant promises remain the one constant in a turbulent picture.

Move on to the life and death of Jesus we find yet another messy picture, worked over countless times by scholars and preachers, in which the one constant is the New Covenant. The story of the Passion, in particular, reflects once again a rather negative view of humanity: fickle, hot headed, cowardly, manipulative, self-serving, faulty in judgement, vacillating etc. Tragedy ensues, but underpinning the whole story is the same sense of God's steadfast love, expressed in the Resurrection. The remainder of the NT testifies to the power of this conviction.

Where do we go with this? What is the call of discipleship? I would argue that our primary role as Christian disciples is first to affirm and sustain that conviction – that God's tender mercy and steadfast love are the true and unflinching ground of hope, in the face of the uncomfortable reality about life and about people. We honour God's name by never submitting to 'fate' arguments or 'judgement' arguments, by never acting or speaking in such a way as to support the exclusive literalist interpretations I have referred to. Life is complex and messy; grow up and do all you can to sustain hope.