

Sermon Lent 1 2014 – Knowledge of Good & Evil

Genesis 2 v15 – 3 v7 p4, Psalm 32, Romans 5 vv 12-19 p1132, Matthew 4 vv 1-11 p967

Why was it so wrong to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil?

Knowledge is surely a good thing. There is a whole book of the Bible (Proverbs) devoted to extolling the virtues of knowledge. The more we know, the more we can do – cooking, gardening, crafts, science, engineering, the arts, whatever. The more we know, the more we can do; the more we can do, the more good we can do. The more we know, the more we understand. The more we know about this wonderful world, surely the greater our sense of God Who created everything that is. *And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.*

So why was it so wrong to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil? Was it the specific knowledge of good and evil that was so wrong rather than knowledge itself in general? Surely, if we are to live good lives rather than bad, we have to know the difference between good and evil. I can't entirely go along with the theory that you are innocent so long as you don't know that what you are doing is wrong. Surely, if we want to be good people, it is our duty to learn to distinguish between good and evil and, by the grace of God, to choose good over evil every time. So why was it so wrong to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil? Surely to know God is to know good.

There is an arrogant knowledge and there is a humble knowledge. The arrogant know-all thinks he knows everything. He is superior to people who don't know what he knows. He makes up his own mind about things. He doesn't need other people. He doesn't need God. He doesn't so much know the difference between good and evil as decide for himself what is good and what is evil. St Paul says, *Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth.* Paul is saying that some people know that they are so smart that they effectively put other people down, whereas, in reality we know in part. All of us know in part. The more excellent way is charity – love – which abides for ever and is the greatest of the three – faith, hope and charity. Love builds Christians. Love builds the Church. Love builds our relationship with God. Love enables us to serve God in the world. Arrogance damages the Church, downgrades other Christians and damns the arrogant in their arrogance. Arrogance cannot acknowledge its dependence on God. Arrogance cannot enjoy fellowship with the people it despises. Arrogance cannot learn. Arrogance cannot serve, only dominate. Arrogant knowledge seizes control of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Arrogant knowledge is sin *and the wages of sin is death.*

Wisdom and knowledge in the Bible go closely together. The wise person acknowledges the limits of his or her knowledge. All our knowledge is provisional. There is always more to discover. If you look back over human history – whether at science or politics or economics or geography or medicine or philosophy or pretty well any discipline – you see that very often what very clever people have believed to be certain, even what everybody believed to be certain knowledge, has been proved to be wrong. Even where what people believed in the past has not been proved to be wrong, it has generally turned out that there is a great deal more to it than was previously imagined. The more you know, the more you realise there is to discover. And this is certainly true of the knowledge of God. God is infinite. He really is

infinite. What we know of God is so small a part of what there is to know of God that we are almost bound to be misled. We are certainly misleading ourselves if we think we know very much about God at all. He is always more than we can imagine and, in reality, the universe, what God has created, is itself more than we can imagine, and yet the creation is infinitely less great than the Creator.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge. Yes, the Bible says that too. There is a humble knowledge which is of more worth than rubies precisely because it knows its limitations. The knowledge it has it receives as the gift of God. It is received with humble thanksgiving. Precisely because it is received humbly and thankfully it is useful to build. To know as we are known. To know God, to have eternal life. God is love. God is charity, *αγάπη*. *Charity edifieth.*

Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. The fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil was the arrogant knowledge which *puffeth up* the person but destroys his relationship with God, with other people and with God's creation. The food we ought to consume – *every word which proceedeth out of the mouth of God*, Jesus – nourishes us to eternal life. This is the humble knowledge, the charity which edifieth, building our relationship with God, building one another up into the full stature of Christ, building God's kingdom in the world. Humanity's rebellion against God poisoned our race with the arrogant fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Redeemed in Christ, we start fresh in the fear of the LORD which is the beginning of knowledge.