

ST GEORGE'S WINDSOR
1 March 2020
LENT 1

Our reading from the Old Testament today told the story of Adam and Eve, and their eating of the apple from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It is a story about our loss of innocence. There was a time when it was taken as a record of historical fact; a real Adam and Eve falling from Paradise, and henceforth ensuring that their descendants should inherit a sinful nature.

Though this is no longer credible, the fable still tells the truth about the human situation. There is something tragic about us. Collectively and as individuals, we are caught up in a mesh of downward-dragging forces; in the trap of what some people call 'sin'. You do not have to delve very far into your own personality, or look at much of the world around you, to discover evidence that this is so.

Dissatisfied with our predicament, we find ourselves looking back to, and longing for, the days of uncomplicated and uncorrupted childhood, or looking forward to, and aching for, a future and only dreamed-of Paradise. Such desires need not indicate our escaping from reality. Indeed, they might well be glimpses of the glory for which we are intended; for which we have been created.

Nevertheless, we cannot pretend that our present predicament is anything other than it is. We cannot lie to ourselves. The season of Lent is a 'penitential' season. We are invited to look ourselves straight in the eye; to acknowledge the truth about who we are, and where we stand.

In order to help us do that, let me say something about the poet Edwin Muir; one of the great poets of the twentieth century. (I wish I had time to say more about him because, though sometimes difficult to read, his voice is profound and contemporary.)

Muir was born on the Orkney Islands where his father farmed. He looked back on his childhood as an idyllic time. In his poem **Childhood**, he pictures himself:

Long time he lay upon the sunny hill,
 To his father's house below securely bound.
Far off the silent, changing sound was still,
 With the black islands lying thick around.

.....

Often he wondered what new shores were there.
 In thought he saw the still light on the sand,
The shallow water clear in tranquil air,
 And walked through it in joy from strand to strand.

And, if he looked back to his childhood as an ideal time, he also saw into the future, and perceived some promised harmony; some reconciliation. In his poem **The Transfiguration**

(written, I suppose, after he had regained his once-lost Christian faith) he wrote that "at a time when time is ripe":

Then he will come, Christ the uncrucified,
Christ the dis-crucified, his death undone,
His agony unmade, his cross dismantled –
Glad to be so – and the tormented wood
Will cure its hurt and grow into a tree
In a green springing corner of young Eden.....

Muir looked backwards and forwards, and perceived a kind of promise. But (and this must be the focus of this Lenten sermon) he was not afraid to acknowledge the truth of the present.

The course of his life was far from smooth and, at one stage in his life, he underwent psychoanalysis. We might think of it as a process of assisted self-examination; not entirely unlike that sort of 'facing the truth about ourselves' that we are invited to embark upon during the season of Lent. In his autobiography he writes:

"At last by painful stages I reached a state which resembled conviction of sin, though formulated in different terms. I realised the elementary fact that everyone, like myself, was troubled by sensual desires and thoughts, by unacknowledged failures and frustrations causing self-hatred and hatred of others, by dead memories of shame and grief which had been shovelled underground long since because they could not be borne. I saw that my lot was the human lot, that when I faced my own unvarnished likeness I was one among all men and women, all of whom had the same desires and thoughts, the same failures and frustrations, the same unacknowledged hatred of themselves and others, the same hidden shames and griefs, and that if they confronted these things they could win a certain liberation from them."

Muir's facing of the truth about himself led him to comprehend the truth about others. And, seeing the truth about others, that they suffer from the effects of the same malignant forces as do we, engenders in us (paradoxically) a sort of understanding; a kind of 'compassion' such as seems to redeem and make the past worthwhile, and pave the way to a kinder future. Our taking seriously the fact that Lent is a 'penitential' season – a time for us to face the truth about ourselves – turns out to be a 'schooling' in which we learn the more to love our neighbour; at least to touch the hem of what we remember and look forward to as a kind of Eden.

In 1956, just three years before Edwin Muir died, another volume of his poetry was published. It was given the title **One Foot In Eden**. The title was a tribute to the poem **One Foot In Eden** that can be found between its covers. It has a kind of retrospective air about it; some 'looking back' in order to make sense of things. And, as the poet reflects upon his life with all its complications, difficulties, disappointments and failures, he is aware that – and I quote the last two lines of his poem:

Strange blessings never in Paradise
Fall from these beclouded skies.

Of course we find quite naturally, in an idealised past and an idealised future, some promise of the destiny to which we are called. But it is in engagement with the truth of the present (the facing of the real truth about ourselves) that the journey to that destiny begins.

Our reading from the book of Genesis, with its tale about the eating of the apple and its consequences, drew our attention to what is known, in Christian circles, as the 'Fall' of humankind. Perhaps, our acknowledgment of the 'Fall', our seeing it as an affliction that we share with others, and the consequent engendering of understanding and compassion, might encourage us to see the 'Fall' (quite paradoxically and strangely) as a 'Fall' upwards.

Strange blessings never in Paradise
Fall from these beclouded skies.

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