

St John's and St James
Sunday 1st March 2020

Genesis 2:15-17 and 3:1-7
Romans 5: 12-19
Matthew 4:1-11

A Tale of Sin and Grace

Bzzzz

The sound echoed round the waiting room on the dizzyingly-high top floor of the ultra modern office block. The figure on the chic, incredibly uncomfortable, sofa flinched nervously, and adjusted his new tie.

The receptionist leaned forward across the desk. "Mr De Ville will see you now," he announced.

The figure took a moment to gather himself, and stood.

"This way", the receptionist indicated. "First day?" The new recruit nodded. "He's not as bad as you think," said the receptionist, as he passed, knocked, entered the inner office, and closed the door behind him.

"He's much worse."

Inside, Mr De Ville welcomed the novice with a broad smile. "Coffee?" he offered. He moved from behind his desk to take a seat in one of the two armchairs stationed comfortably around a small table where a cafetière was gently steaming. He signalled to the vacant chair. "Have a seat – Jack, isn't it? Good name, by the way. Trustworthy. It's all about the trust, you know. What do you think of the view?"

He gestured towards the floor-to-ceiling plate glass windows. The clouds cleared and Jack could see what seemed like all the kingdoms of the world.

"Very impressive, sir,"

Mr De Ville leant forward confidentially. "And it's all mine. All mine."

Jack didn't like to mention that there were some areas where there seemed to be an impenetrable brightness that set them apart. He found himself wondering what they were, and hoping Mr dV didn't notice his interest.

"I like to see all my new recruits," went on Mr De Ville. "I've learned a few things over the course of my career, and – well, why waste all that experience? He leaned back and Jack caught just the faintest glimmer of green in his immaculate suit. "So, tell me about sin."

Jack relaxed. He had studied this on his induction course.

"Sin," he began, "can be defined as the breakdown of the relationship between human beings and Go..." He caught the expression on Mr dV's face just in time. "...between human beings and The Other Side. The human picture language describes it as an encounter between Adam and Eve and a serpent, when the serpent carefully placed the idea in their heads that they could disobey G...er.... The Other Side. I've studied this carefully sir, and I have to say I think it was a masterful piece of work. Just enough of a hint "Did God say...?, and it was like switching points on a railway track – off they went in exactly the way you wanted them to, and they thought **they** had made the decision.

"And, of course, once they had discovered that they **could** go off on their own merry way, well, they couldn't unlearn how to do it. You could say they had *fallen* right into the trap. Barrier between God and humanity. Between God and Creation. Inbuilt propensity to mess things up. Nothing they can do about it. Ka-boom."

He looked at his boss, expecting to see affirmation and encouragement. The suit glowed green and faded. Mr dV smiled thinly. "I see you are developing your sins of pride and obsequiousness, Jack. Don't think they will win you any favours from me."

A cold chill filled the air and Jack became aware of a huge gaping emptiness within.

"So," went on Mr dV, "what next? Where do you fit into all this?"

"My role, is to exploit this fractured relationship and encourage further breakdown of relationships, with the ultimate aim of promoting chaos

throughout Creation. At which point we win. *[Pause]* You win,” he corrected himself.

“By.....?” The tone was now glacial.

“Distraction. Subterfuge. Addiction. Death.”

A file of papers had appeared at Mr dV's right hand. He opened it and perused the top sheet.

“Excellent. I take it that was your route here? It says here that you used to be a Chr... follower of the Other Side.”

A memory pierced Jack's heart. The empty space within gaped wider. He tried to quell the mounting shame as he had been taught, but failed.

He re-gathered himself.

“Yes sir.”

“You had a good agent on your case. One of the best. Never fails. I want you to be like him, Jack. You have the potential. You could go far.”

The familiar sin of pride bloomed again in Jack's heart. The shame faded, even as he remembered where he had seen the receptionist before, where he had heard his voice....

“So, as former agent of the other side, you are well placed to attack those who are in the same – unfortunate – position. What is your strategy, Jack? Use your own experience if you like.”

Jack gathered himself. It seemed like it was going pretty well.

“Firstly, distract them from the enormity of sin. Persuade them it's an out-of-date concept.

“Then, get them to believe that there are no consequences. Or at least to downplay the real fallout from sin.

Human misery – it's all their own fault.

War – we have right on our side.

Inequity – it's the natural result of the way the markets work.
You know the type of thing.

"Next - if they start getting twinges towards taking sin seriously, encouraging them to compare themselves with others is also a winner. "I'm OK really, at least I'm not like *someone else*." Harold Shipman or Adolf Hitler are good examples, but the best ones are people they actually know. A good dose of moral superiority works wonders for our cause.

"And if all else fails, just get them to put off a decision to actively follow.. er.. the other side. Play up the downsides of any form of commitment. Suggest reasons not to get, or stay, involved with the church – they are so much easier to pick off then.

"Shall I go on?"

"Please do."

Jack wrenched his attention away from the ache which was growing in that empty space in his soul.

"OK, so next, especially for Christians - get them hung up on the little things. Focus on the symptoms, not the underlying disease. So when the word "sin" comes up, they think of being grumpy, or of not putting out the recycling, or of not getting round to visiting a friend. Anything but that it's what separates them from God. Anything rather than letting them see their need of God all day every day.

"And when you're ready to move in for the kill, find their weak point and exploit it. I was... I mean they are... so stupid. So busy, rushing around, being "good", never spending time listening to God about how they need to grow and learn. Trying to improve purely by self-help rather than letting the Holy Spirit into their lives. Needing affirmation was my weak point. Never realised it until it was too late

"The agent on my case was so subtle. I'd have picked up a full-on attack straight off, but no, he just cunningly undermined everything I believed

"What difference could you make if you were in a position of influence....?"

"Surely God said you should use your gifts....."

“Unorthodox? Maybe, but you’re in control. You can stop it any time you like. It’s for a good cause....

“If you don’t deliver the results, they won’t like you, then how could you change anything...”

And all the time, driving a wedge between me and God as the things I was doing became more and more destructive.

And right to the end, I actually thought I was doing God’s will

Whilst all the time I had moved so far from God that I was totally beyond his love and mercy.....

He stopped. The aching, gaping void within him threatened to swallow him up.

He reached for coffee mug and took a swig. It was a lie – it wasn’t coffee at all. The brown liquid within was foul and putrid.

Jack forced the words out “....moved so far from God that I was totally beyond his grace.....”

“What did you just say?” The voice was like knives, cutting through his soul.

“Never, ever, use that word in here. Not even to deny its existence. If humanity understands grace then I am finished. Done with, you understand. And you go down with me.”

But the word had been spoken.

Grace.

It hung in the air. Shimmering.

Grace.

Humanity couldn’t restore the relationship with God, so God came as Jesus and did it for us. Life, death, resurrection. “Opened up the gates of heaven and beckoned us in.”

Grace.

Memories of his Youth Group Leader’s voice. “Bit cheesy, Jack, but the best way to remember what grace means is to use it as a mnemonic – God’s riches at Christ’s expense.”

Grace

The free gift of God's love and mercy, forgiveness and restoration extended to all who would just reach out and accept it.

To all.

All.

Could that possibly include even him?

After all he had been. All he had done. All he was doing now. Could God really welcome him home?

He looked to the window to compose himself, and his eye fixed on the point where four panes of glass came together in their frame. There, in the heart of hell, a cross.

An invitation. For him.

"Yes, please," he whispered

Eternity hung within a heart beat.

.....and a scream of rage swelled from his companion, echoed round the space, and was gone.

A fly buzzed against the glass. Was there a touch of green to its iridescent body? The windows of the empty office block looked out over the city below. Same view, yet different. The spots of brightness he had seen earlier were now crystal clear. God's communities. The churches of the city.

He turned and left the room, carefully closing the door behind him. The gaping void in his soul was gone – filled by the love and mercy of God. He ran easily down the stinking stairs and out, out into a fresh new life, the angels partying as he went.....