

Lent 1 2008

'Leaving Home'

Genesis 2

I first left home when I was about 8 years of age. It was a bid for freedom from the fist of my elder brother and from what was to my eyes the failure of my long-suffering mother to arbitrate fairly and to defend the weak from the oppression of the mighty. I had had enough. I was off. I wrapped up a few essentials, took my bike and headed for freedom. I didn't get very far, just to what we called the 'rough patch', a piece of undeveloped land next door but one. There I paused on my long journey into exile and contemplated life on the road and imagined the pangs of conscience I was hoping would be even now beginning to afflict my abandoned parent. An hour or so passed, teatime approached and my rebellious will weakened; perhaps I had meted out enough punishment and I would be able to return home to the outstretched arms of my bereft mother, and the fatted calf would be slaughtered in my honour, hopefully under the envious gaze of my elder brother.

Now no doubt these days by this stage the police helicopter would be scouring the streets and alleyways in desperate search for a lost son, but in those less careful times the truth is that my mother showed no sign of having noticed my absence, tea was jam sandwiches as usual and my brother's reign of tyranny continued without respite.

I never flounced away from my parental home again, but as so many things in childhood are, I guess it was a bit of a dress rehearsal for more profound leave-takings later in life. There in infant form were the feelings of suddenly being on my own, stepping into an unknown future, emotionally almost naked, and yet at the same time a tingling excitement, a sense of the significance of the moment, a walking into an unknown future with a mixture of trepidation and anticipation. It was like that when I first left home to come to this city for my university years. Perhaps that resonates with you as you think of when you first left home – perhaps to go to college, or to get married, or to go to war or to move into your own flat, or perhaps even to escape, rebel or elope. Nearly all of us have had to leave home, some with an enormous sense of relief, others with regret, and most of us, if we're honest, with a mixture of the two.

For Adam and Eve, the leave-taking seems like an irascible parent throwing out a wayward teenager; they are conducted to the door and flung out onto the street, the door slams shut and the bolts firmly pushed across. Ever since Augustine in the fourth century we have viewed Adam's Fall as the great cosmic catastrophe, the root of all the world's woes and the cause of an enduring enmity between God and humankind.

In more recent years however it has become fashionable to look back to an older theology than Augustine's, that of the second century Irenaeus. For Irenaeus, humankind began as an infancy. Human history

was intended as a growing up, men and women maturing into the divine image; hardship and suffering in this scheme are not so much punishments as tutors, necessary disciplines to lead us as a human race to responsible adulthood. The eating of the fruit is then seen not so much as full-blown rebellion but as a child's impatience to rush ahead into things that he or she is not ready to deal with.

For what it's worth I think there is wisdom in both Augustine and Irenaeus but probably a danger in pushing both too far; the danger of Augustine and original sin is that every human desire and decision is to be suspected and judged unworthy, and that can lead to self-hatred and to a negative and harsh view of life and of humanity. Irenaeus's doctrine is more humane and life-affirming but it can be naive and bland about the deep-rootedness of sin both in us and in society around us.

In the Genesis text there is both an implacable hostility to human folly but also a tenderness that is often missed. If Adam is the prodigal Son then the God who slams the gate shut does not do so simply in anger and petulance; yes he does the hard Father, but not before he does the motherly bit of making sure they are clothed before they are sent out into the chill winds East of Eden. The judgment has been given – they must leave home, that is now their destiny but they are still loved and it's as though there is a bit of a family conference before they have to go.

That is beautifully portrayed in John Milton's epic poem, *Paradise Lost*. This year is the 400th anniversary of Milton's birth and so he has been returning to the limelight a little – and quite right too.

Milton, politically republican and on Cromwell's side and theologically puritan, wrote *Paradise Lost* as a defence and confident statement of a traditional Augustinian view of sin and the Fall. However his immense human learning, insight and wisdom got the better of him. One commentator says this:

The true, if unadmitted, hero of the epic is not God, still less Christ, and not Satan, in spite of the Romantic view that Milton was really 'of the Devil's party': it is Adam, man, who faces a world he never made amid all the horrors involved in his own nature with dignity and resolution. The final lines of the poem express with peculiar beauty this combination of gloom and chastened hope – despair mutating into resolution.

'The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and providence their guide:
They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow
Through Eden took their solitary way.'

And so they leave the Paradise garden and now must walk their way through the wilderness and must earn their daily bread by blood, sweat and tears. And it is to the wilderness that Jesus turns before beginning his saving ministry; in these Lenten days Jesus walks with us in the dry

and barren land. He is a long way from his heavenly home; he has travelled into the far country where he must sweat and toil, where he must know hunger, where he must be tested to the limits and where he must listen to the Tempter wooing him into disobedience. For Irenaeus Jesus was Man fully ripe, the union of the divine Word and a humanity that had now matured into adulthood. Adam was but a child; Jesus was grown up and was in a position consciously to choose the right in full knowledge of its implications. He therefore opens the way for a new humanity; human history and experience in this scheme of things is not just wasted but becomes part of the scheme of salvation; the wilderness is the place of tutoring, of preparing humanity to enter into our true destiny as children of God.

My experience of leaving home was both a cutting of the old cords of being a child of my parents, going out into the big wide world, having to fend for myself, inevitably making mistakes and learning from them: but at the same time entering into a new relationship with them, still a son but an adult one, able to enjoy good relations with my parents not because I had to, or because I was dependent, but because I wanted to. Perhaps we have to leave home in order to know what it is to come home.