



Invited

LENT 2021

Episode Two: Fallen

Welcome to week two of Invited. Last week we heard all about how much God loves us and desires a relationship of love with us. This week, we start to look at the challenges of maintaining that relationship. We wrestle with the idea that David Wells presented to us last week – that we don't always do the good we want to do or avoid doing the bad that we want to avoid. Our guest speaker this week is our newest Diocesan priest, Fr Thomas Kent. He was ordained in July 2020 and is part of the clergy team at Guildford Parish.

Guest Speaker – Fr Thomas Kent

Some years ago, Pope Francis said in a homily that the Church should be like a field hospital.

It's a phrase he has used quite a few times over the years, and it's important because it recognises the way in which Christians are called to be on the front line, out there on the periphery of society, bringing the gift of faith to those who need it most.

I don't know about you, but when I think about this image of the Church as a field hospital, I tend to think of myself as one of the people carrying out the work of healing. As members of the Church, we've been given the gift of faith. And now we must go and share it with others.

We know about Jesus. And now we've got to go and help others find out about him too.

And that's all well and good. However, what I think Pope Francis is challenging us to recognise is that as members of the Church, first and foremost, we are all patients in need of healing. Patients in the field hospital. Each one of us, no matter who we are, or what our status is, is as much in need of healing as anybody else.

Right now, you might be thinking, wait a minute Father Thomas. You're a priest, you hear confessions, you visit the sick and the dying. You clearly have work to do in this field hospital. Well, that is true. As a priest, I have been called to a particular ministry of healing.

However, just as a medical doctor can fall ill, priests too are in need of spiritual healing. As a priest, yes, I've been called by God to undertake a very public role in the field hospital, but as a Christian, first and foremost, I am also one of its patients.

And I think it's important to recognise this, because in the past there used to be this image of the Church as a kind of fortress, where sin was kept on the outside, and only holy people could be on the inside.

Maybe some people were thought of as very holy and very close to God, like the saints, or the clergy or the monks, nuns and the priests. And other people were thought of as sinners and needed to work a lot harder in order to be perfect.

I've heard stories from people who tell me that they were practically forced to go to confession every weekend and list their mortal sins, and maybe a priest or nun would give them a telling off.

And I'm sure you've all heard that, that classic line 'I went to a Catholic University and earned a degree in guilt' or words to that effect. That was not a healthy view of sin and I think that, as a result, during the cultural revolution of the 60s and 70s lots of people jumped at the chance to leave the Church.

Lots of people still think that the Church is in some way obsessed with sin.

In many respects we've now seen things go in completely the opposite direction. Contemporary society is extremely permissive, and to suggest that there might even be such a thing as sin is, well, probably best not talked about !

And actually as a priest, I must be honest, I do find it very hard to bring up the subject of sin. I often feel as though any mention of it might put people off, and I really don't want to do that. I want to draw people in, but to ignore the reality of sin, I would suggest, is just as unhealthy as obsessing over it.

So returning to the doctor/hospital analogy; at some points in life, everybody needs a doctor, be it for a routine check-up, or for a more serious condition. We don't need to obsess over our health in order to remain healthy - that would be hypochondria -but at the same time, if we neglect to look after our health, neglect to look after ourselves, we can become very unhealthy, and that isn't good.

Nobody ever says 'Oh, we mustn't talk about health, because it's an awkward subject.' If anything, people quite like to talk about their health, and there are countless books and blogs and apps and TV shows that help people to stay healthy. People recognise that it's good to stay healthy and that we need to try and take positive steps to maintain our health.

I would like to suggest that the same approach can be taken towards sin. Just as bad health affects the body, sin affects the soul, affects our relationship with God.

'Not all sin is serious', to quote St John, but all of us are very much prone to it and we need to take steps in order to preserve ourselves from it. People flock to receive a vaccine, but do they flock to receive God's grace, God's forgiveness?

Just like an illness the reality of sin can be recognised by its symptoms. The symptoms of sin are present all over the world.

St Paul lists a few of them, in his letter to the Galatians. I'm going to read that out to you, he says there is 'sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, discord, jealousy and rage, rivalries, divisions, factions, envy, drunkenness, orgies and the like.' Now, I'm sure there aren't too many of us watching this video today who are involved in orgies and sorcery - at least I certainly hope there aren't! But things like, envy, jealousy, divisions, perhaps even a little bit of lust, or a little bit of selfishness? I'm sure we've all had some degree of experience in those areas. If not, then you really are already a saint, and should be giving this talk !

But the fact is, if we're honest, everybody experiences these things and the reason why we experience them is because we live in a fallen world. All have sinned.

St Paul says this in Romans, 3:23. 'All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.'

We use the word *fallen*, because deep down we know that the human race is capable of so much more. It's as though we've been made for goodness, we've been designed to appreciate and to try and achieve good.

And boy, if you look around the world, despite all the sin we can see around us we can also recognise an incredible capacity and incredible potential for achieving goodness.

Personally speaking, I've been bowled over by the amazing sense of generosity and altruism that people have exemplified during the pandemic; the keyworkers, the NHS, the teachers, the scientists, all their hard work suggests to me that humanity has this inbuilt capacity to strive towards the good.

The difficulty is, no matter how hard we try, and we can see this throughout history, the problem of sin has never disappeared. No matter how much effort we put into trying to establish the reign of justice and peace, somewhere in the world or somewhere in our own lives, sin keeps on rearing its ugly head. It's as though we were made to achieve goodness, and yet too frequently we experience evil.

It's like we struggle to achieve our purpose and in that sense, we have fallen.

And that's exactly what the sacred scriptures teach us, we read about all of this in the book of Genesis - if you have a Bible to hand, do please follow along with any references I make.

Throughout chapter one, we encounter again and again the following phrase, 'and it was good.' Verses 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, in *all* these verses after the creation of all the various aspects of creation, God says, 'it was good.' God made the world, for goodness.

And this is true, even more so for humanity whom God makes in His own image.

That means we have a share in God's nature. Unlike the other animals, we have a rational soul which makes us capable of knowing, of processing complex thoughts, and most significantly, of loving.

We are made for love. That is our purpose.

God creates men and women so that they may know what it is like to love another person.

And not only that, He gives them dominion. The phrase is He gives them 'dominion' and lordship that is over the entire creation. God Himself is the Lord of creation, and yet he allows us the privilege of sharing in that lordship.

And what we read, is that having given humanity this dignified position God says 'It was very good'. You see, humanity is the crowning achievement of God's creation, and it was very good. We are in God's own words *very good*.

Chapter two verse eight in Genesis describes how God would walk alongside man or woman. The Catechism of the Church [paragraph 378] interprets this 'walking alongside' God as a form of solidarity with our Creator. We were in his presence and we could freely experience the radiance and the beauty of His love.

This all changes in chapter three, where humanity first experiences temptation, which is represented in the story by the evil servant, also known as the devil. In the Gospel of John chapter eight verse 44, Jesus describes the devil as the father of lies - he is a liar, because he somehow convinces Adam and Eve that they can become godlike, ironically, by disobeying God. And that's a lie, because God has already made us God like.

We already share his image; the devil is offering something that we already have.

And yet, for some reason we caved into this temptation to put ourselves first, to put ourselves above the will of God and the result of this 'act of rebellion' let's call it, is what we call the fall. The God-given dignity that made our humanity so very good became, from that point onwards, tainted or tarnished, so to speak. Awareness of God's presence became fuzzy and dull. Life on Earth became toilsome.

We read this again, a little further on in chapter three - in seeing fellow humans, no longer as *companions* but as rivals and competitors. We began to turn against each other. We see that in chapter four and the stories of Cain and Abel, and we all know what happens there.

The Genesis story does leave some questions unanswered, like why was there a serpent in the garden at all? And why God created a tree from which it was forbidden to pick fruit.

I don't know that I'm going to be able to answer those questions. There's no quick answer. Perhaps God wanted to teach us that all of our actions, in some way, have consequences. Perhaps He wanted us to learn the art of true love in a world where you have to sacrifice yourself in order to show it.

I'm not sure.

What is essential, is that the Genesis story tries to make sense of the reality that we that we experience every day. On the one hand we have this immense capacity for goodness, and on the other, this awful inability to achieve it because of our sin.

The fact that we're still so attracted to goodness is a reminder that although the whole of creation has become tarnished through sin, we are still made in the image and likeness of God, and because of that, we retain an incredible dignity and value and God still loves us.

As David Wells put it so movingly last week ‘there is nothing we can do to make God love us more and there is nothing we can do to make God love us less’. We are his flesh and blood. How could He ever stop loving us.

And this is why God will never allow evil to have the final word.

So in chapter three verse 14 of Genesis God addresses the serpent. This is what he says;

‘Because you have done this, cursed are you above all cattle and above all wild animals. Upon your belly you shall go and dust you shall eat all the days of your life, and [this is the important bit] I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your seed and her seed. He shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel.’

What we have here is God making a promise. God promises that one of Eve's descendants, one of her ‘seed’, a man, will one day be born. This man will stamp on the serpent's head and in doing this he too will be bruised. He too will taste the pain of life on fallen earth, but he will also bring an end to evil and sin.

In other words, even though we get things wrong, even though we sin, out of his great love for us, God himself will make things right.

Join us next week, to find out how Jesus comes to save us.

Personal Testimony – Simon South (Question and answer format)

Interviewer: Thank you so much for joining us Simon, and for offering to share a little bit of your personal story with us today. Can you tell us a little bit about your early years, your younger years, were you born and raised as a Catholic?

‘No, not at all. I was born in South London. Quite an ordinary upbringing, I guess, but faith never made any impact into my life at all ... it was never ever mentioned. One conversation I remember having with my dad was that “you'll find your own way in life and you'll find what you're looking for, don't worry”, and that was that was as intense as it got really, I think you'd call that a broad brief!

Interviewer: And so as a young adult then, what sort of person did you become?

‘I guess, having left school, that I became a typical secular individual. I was very ambitious with my job. I was very driven - I had to have a house, I had to have a car. I had to *have*... and I guess, just reflecting back on the words that Father Thomas shared with us earlier, I really was focused on my will and not God's will and I can

see that very much now. But at the time, when I was living what I thought was a good life, I didn't have that context at all to live by. It was very selfish life.'

Interviewer: When we were talking before you said you were living by this sort of capitalist dream. Were you aware that there was something missing in your life?

'Huge, absolutely huge! Hindsight is such a wonderful thing. There was this enormous hole in my life, I really didn't know what was missing but there was just this lack of *something*. I tried again and again, and I worked harder, and I bought more stuff, and I did more hours and I looked for more promotions... and I just drove and drove and drove myself trying to find this hole; what was it, how could I fill it? And looking back so much of my life was lonely, was sad, and was empty.

'And that's what I guess drove me, trying to find what it was that was missing in my life. But I couldn't find it - I couldn't find it. I tried all sorts of things. Through my career I was invited to join the Freemasons which is quite a thing to share on this journey. Again, I was looking to find what this 'hole' was.

'I started to study Kabbalah thinking that perhaps that might fill this hole in my life, and I started reading conspiracy books that were very popular back in the 90s. Things like the Dan Brown books, and the *God Delusion* and those sorts of books, and I remember, I was reading Richard Dawkin's *The God Delusion* - in chapter two, Dawkins argues that man is so clever, that if there was a teapot floating around the rings of Saturn, we could see it and therefore... If God really existed, we would find Him, and we would see Him. And I remember this almighty sense of how arrogant and how crazy that is! For me, that that encounter with Richard Dawkin's book was one of the key steps towards me finding my faith with the Lord.

Interviewer: So, tell us a little bit about that then. How did that come about?

'Well, it was it was a wonderful accident, really. My wife and I were out walking one Sunday morning, around in the town and we just happened to walk past the Catholic church and the choir was singing and it really was beautiful. We walked in to see what was going on, and to see where that wonderful sound was coming from, and we sat at the back of the church for the rest of mass. As the parish priest was walking out, he said "Hello, you're new, how are you, are you visiting?" and the conversation started there.

'I just felt myself being drawn into that conversation, I was being given permission to have that conversation and sharing with Father Philip that I was looking... I was lost, I was confused, I needed something. I needed help.

'And the rest becomes history. I carried on talking with him, I went back and saw him a couple of times. And then he suggested it might be a good idea to start exploring the essence of faith with the RCIA [Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults] programme. I went along every Saturday morning and met with a lovely lady called Ann and the parish priest, and it was a very gentle very, very lovely exploration of Scripture, and myself, and each time we had this conversation there was that little bit less of a hole, and a little bit more and a

little bit more filled up. And it just became the most all-consuming hunger. To find out more, to understand, why, why was I feeling this way.

Interviewer: That's amazing. Thank you so much. We're going to finish your story in a couple of week's time, because that's not the end ... God works in your life in a wonderful way.

Interviewer: I just want to reflect a little bit on your early experiences, and how that ties in with perhaps something that Father Thomas was saying about how the absence of God led you - perhaps you wouldn't have described it as sin at the time, but now looking back, how would you put all that together?

'Well, the words of Father Thomas were almost a mirror of my journey, one that I can absolutely relate to. He was saying about acting on God's will, well I wasn't, I was that fallen sinner. I was that individual. Not just plucking the apple but taking the entire crop, just for myself. This whole essence of everyone needing a doctor - I really did need a doctor. It was only since joining church and finding an understanding my faith, and finding God and our Lord, I can look back and see. I was that patient in need of care - there was a hole eating me from the inside out and I didn't know how to solve it, I really didn't. Taking more apples off the tree doesn't fill the hole, it really doesn't, so, the, the words of Fr Thomas were absolutely spot on. And I guess, for me, that it was really lovely.

Fr Thomas explained about bathing in the radiance and beauty of God's love. For me, that is a poetic and perfect summary of how I found my faith and the difference that finding my faith has made. I've been able to touch, and to embrace, and to relish the radiance of God's beauty. But it's knowing that it's there, that's the challenge. We go through life thinking that we know the answers, we have all the answers and that if we live a wonderfully secular, capitalist, commercial life that we're going to be happy - my first 35 years really did prove to me that that's not the case.'

Interviewer: So, what would you say now? if there's somebody watching this that is not engaged with the Church, they're living their life and they feel sort of frustrated or angry or like they've got this 'hole', this void that they're desperate trying to fill but they don't know where to go and they don't know what to do - what would you advise them, what would you say to them?

'I'd use the words that the Lord uses actually, which is 'come and see'. What's the worst that can happen? I have had such a truly blessed experience, it was such a completion of my life, thanks be to God. Go along and spend some time with your parish priest, speak to your deacon, speak to the parishioners that you see coming and going. Come and see and you will be able to bathe in that radiance, and that beauty.'

Prayer



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We come to you Father as your precious children knowing that you love us unconditionally.

We are sorry that we do not always live according to your will, choosing our own paths instead, just as Adam and Eve did in the garden. We thank you for the ability you have given us to achieve great things, and we pray that you will inspire us to rely on your strength, your wisdom and your unending love to guide us on the right paths.

Be with us as we seek to spread your good news and reach out in love to all those around us.

Reflection Questions

- How often do I sit and bathe in God's radiance and beauty? Take some time now to ponder God's goodness.
- Do I treat the health of my soul the same way I treat the health of my body?
- Where do I need God's help in my life, where do I keep falling down? (You will not have to share this in group conversations).
- How do I see the Church; as a field hospital where I can give and receive healing, or a fortress where I will be judged for my imperfections?
- Has anything Fr Thomas said changed that?
- Can I personally do anything to change other people's perception?

Conversation

Just as you did last week, welcome everyone and find out how they are – you are a community that cares about each other.... Take the time to show that love and care.

For the first half of the meeting, discuss your responses to the reflection questions posed at the end of the episode:

What struck people most about what Fr Thomas and Simon said?

How are they getting on with journaling, is it helpful?

Once everyone has had a chance to share as much or as little as they are comfortable, it is time to prayerfully proclaim the Word:

John 2:13-25

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone.

After a period of quiet, where we allow the Lord's words to speak to our hearts, you can spend some time discussing your response, using these questions as a guide if you would like:

- **'Destroy this Sanctuary, and in three days I will raise it up'** - Imagine yourself in the scene as a Disciple - how would you react to this scene?

- 'Take all this out of here and stop turning my Father's house into a market.' - During this Lent, what do we need to take out of our lives to enable God to make a home in our hearts?
- 'Many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he gave, but Jesus knew them all and did not trust himself to them; he never needed evidence about any man; he could tell what a man had in him.' - What does this quote reveal about our relationship with Jesus?

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God bless,

The diocesan Formation Team.