

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD/EVIL *

Text: Genesis 2:4b-9, 15-17

Domingo J. Diel, Jr.

Not long ago, to speak about and for the environment was still a fashion, a fad. Meanwhile, we have information and experience enough to convince politicians, educators, scientists and ourselves that the unabated destruction of the eco-system through pollution of the environment, would mean also the gradual destruction of human lives. Hence, to pledge and covenant with Mother Earth, to help make it a secure, still habitable and hospitable home for the present and future generations, is no longer a fashion-idea. It is, rather, a commitment to earthly human survival and a covenant towards the well-being of humankind.

Our text in the second chapter of Genesis, represents a statement of a primeval creative act of God: the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the human beings (male and female) themselves. Those of us, who have formal training in theology and the Bible, know that theoretically, there are two versions/variants of the Creation Story. We do not need to know the details of this theory. However, you will know or discover some differences when you read Genesis 1 and compare it with Genesis 2.

In both cases, however, the writer/writers affirm without a shadow of a doubt that it is God, Yahweh, who is the Creator, to whom all Creation, including man and woman, is accountable.

*Sermon given on Dedication Sunday (for CPU personnel) at The University Church, on September 6, 1992.

Both versions of the Creation Story also affirm, that of all created living beings, it is man and woman, who have been given the divine responsibility to multiply, replenishing the earth, and given power and dominion over the rest of Creation.

The drama in the Garden of Eden reflect the unfolding human and earthly history of progress and development. Let us look at this now more closely.

Scene One. The Earth Without Form and Void

It is a non-scenery: no plant, no herb, no animals, no creeping things, no fowls of the air, no mists, no clouds, no water, no rivers, no seas, no man nor woman. Chapter 1 says, "It is total darkness, it is Chaos!"

It is not only a non-scenery, which means there is nothing, nothing to see, and nobody to see, it is also without life, it is void!

Scientists today are trying hard to find out, whether there is life at all in some planets in our solar system, especially in Mars. One sign, they claim, that there could be life, is the presence of mists around it. If such is established, there could be some kind of life.

In the text, in this none-scenery, the Lord God caused the mist to come up the earth, and the rain came down to water the whole face of the ground. Thus, the basic condition for animal and plant life has been made. The prime importance of water to earthly life cannot be over-emphasized. It must, however, be clean water in the rivers and seas for the life of fishes and other aquatic living beings; clean and potable water to sustain human life; and finally enough water for plants and forests, fields and gardens.

It is interesting to note that human life did not simply evolve from the fertile ground, as the text shows, but it came about through a separate and unique act of the Lord God, Yahweh. It is true, God formed the human being (male and female) from the dust of the ground, which made them, one with the rest of Creation. But at the same time, they were unique creatures compared with the rest of creation, since their life was the life-breath of God Himself. This is the very reason, why the human being alone is responsible/accountable to God for whatever happens to Creation, entrusted to him.

Scene Two: The Garden in Eden

The garden is not merely a product of imagination. True, it is now difficult to locate exactly its location in today's geography, but biblical scholarship would place it somewhere in the plain at the head of the Persian Gulf, where the Tigris river flows, or between Turkey and Syria, where the Tigris-Euphrates rivers are located.

It seems to me, locating such a place today, is not as important as what was in the Garden, which was prepared by God Himself, for His prime creature, the human being. Our text tells us that after God had planted the Garden in Eden, He put man/woman in it, and then He made to grow in the Garden every kind of tree. Three kinds were especially mentioned: trees pleasant to the sight and good for food, then the tree of life, and finally the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

In this Garden, the Lord God gave to man, (later also to the woman) the responsibility to till the ground and keep the garden. For it is here where their life could be maintained and sustained, as long as they continued to cultivate and keep the trees and the vegetation for food. In fact, all the trees or their fruits, except one, they could freely use for food. If they had

remained responsible, they could have lived in freedom. If they had remained in agriculture, they could have been sustained well by the Garden.

Man's progress and at the same time, predicament, started when he broke the limit set for him by God. Food, of course, why not also the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? But food could also result into a curse: losing the body shape, for example; increasing cholesterol is another. Fast food, yes, and by it we gain time only to fill it up again with other hectic activities. We know all these, and we know also how to diet to reduce extra fat in order to maintain the shape, and we lessen the in-take of cholesterol-rich food, since we have the knowledge of good and evil.

Human knowledge of good and evil pushed the limit of agricultural life to a techno-industrial civilization: the rain forests and jungles do not only become barren hills or denuded mountains; in many instances, they have literally become concrete jungles. We call it human progress and development, but gradually we now discover the evil results of the same. The price of pushing out the limit (or disobedience) set by God for man/woman was, is and will be to live entangled with good and evil. (To live in sin!).

The couple in the Garden blamed each other - virtually blaming God, because it was the Lord God, who put them together. As if it was not enough to blame each other, they also blamed the serpent. The serpent this time was outsmarted by the human being. Actually this scene in the Garden mirrors pretty well modern life. We easily pass to other responsibilities of error, but we readily claim/retain to ourselves honor and praise. We easily blame others but hardly stand up for what is right and just for fear of repercussions.

As regards nature and environment, let us stop for awhile simply blaming the *kaingineros*, the charcoal producers and illegal loggers. I am sure they have also others to blame. Let us resolve to ourselves how to properly dispose of plastic, papers and bottles, and better still, learn how to reduce/minimize these wastes by questioning the kind of progress and development our society and government are pursuing. There must be a limit set against greed of every sort, also within our academic and church communities. The greed of the rich and the poor alike will surely reduce, sooner than we think, nature and environment into a wasteland.

Scene Three: An Open Garden

The Garden that was quiet and beautiful, planted to trees of every kind and full of pleasant vegetation, that could have sustained the couple from generation to generation, including their descendants; the peaceful co-existence of the animals of the fields and the fowls of the air, fed and nourished by their kind and generous Creator. All this (do you wonder?) was described then as Paradise, only to be lost as quickly as it was made, just because the Couple disregarded the limit set before them by God, and obeyed instead the wiles of a creature lower than themselves. They ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

In so doing, they made the Garden open and free for all: Thorns and thistles started to grow, animals and beasts began to fight and devour each other. The Couple themselves. (You are not hearing fiction, I think I am still close to the text!). They realized evil, they knew shame in their nakedness and they wanted to hide from God. From then on, the chain of misdeeds and evil deeds was on. Who told them they could hide from God? Who told them that it was shameful or a shame to look at their naked bodies, and a shame to look at each other naked? Were

they not man and woman as one flesh? Who told them to rob the trees of their leaves, so they can make a covering of themselves? And who told them that shame and guilt could be covered outwardly? Helpless, they were: helpless in their shame and guilt; helpless in spite of their newly gained knowledge of good and evil, or probably, they have become helpless because of their knowledge of good and evil!

The Paradise, so to speak, was lost. The Garden in Eden was no more and the couple was out in the world multiplied in billion-folds, still robbing trees of their leaves, sharks and sheep of their skin (remember: sharkskin and sheepskin), elephants of their tusks; transforming rain forests and jungles into pavements and concrete jungles, in the process polluting the air with dirty smoke and water with chemical and human wastes. And all in the name of progress and development because the human has become knowledgeable of good and evil.

CONCLUSION:

In the CPU Coat of Arms or Logo, we see/read the Latin words *Scientia et Fides*, Knowledge and Faith. This must have been formulated by the founding fathers during the period when science, reason, knowledge were being contrasted to (with) faith and religion, in order to affirm the unity of both.

I do not imply that Faith as practised by us Christians, is perfect, but human Knowledge is always entangled with good and evil, and Faith with fanaticism and naivete. But let it be allowed, for the Christian Faith to call attention to the evil results of human knowledge.

Prophet Jeremiah described the situation of his time with these words: (Read, Jer. 6:13-15a).

Our time may not be like Jeremiah's time. Like the couple in the Garden of Eden, we may still know "shame and guilt," we may still know how to "blush" when we have done wrong, but we are too shy or perhaps, cowardly to admit lest we lose "our face." We refuse to admit, that we are a part and have a part in the catastrophies of nature and in the worsening conditions of our environment. Through life-style, eating habits and consumerism, human beings have done more damage to the environment than animals!

The knowledge of good and evil can be well illustrated among others, in the discovery and use of nuclear energy: its power is claimed to be cheap and almost perpetual, but its radioactive wastes are as perpetual as its power and there is no place yet to keep the waste; its power-energy can light a megapolis which in turn, it can also totally destroy. It is we after all, who must choose the ways to evil or to good.

Guided with the Faith in the ever Loving and Merciful God, we can dedicate ourselves anew to the Cause of restoring the goodness of God's Creation and Nature, or simply the Earth. We can dedicate ourselves anew and pledge to become responsible trustees/stewards of the Environmental System, that would either make or unmake us.

Before God finally drove the erring couple out of the Garden, He provided them with garments and clothed them. Faith in this kind of a God, who cares, inspires us to stand up for that which is beautiful and lovely, just and true, peaceable and trustworthy in our neighbour and environment, for the sake of Him, who will finally make all things new, even Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen!

DR. DOMINGO J. DIEL, JR.

B.Th., Central Philippine University, 1957

B.D., Serampore College, West Bengal, India, 1966

M.Th., United Theological College Bangalore, India, 1968

Major: Theology

D.Th., Universität Hamburg, Germany, 1974

Major: Missiology

Professor, College of Theology and Personnel Officer, CPU

Wife: Elizabeth Dutt Diel, a nurse

Children: Prima Helga and Soren David