

Views from the Pews: A brain surgeon in Eden

The Eden myth is a story that embeds ancient truths in narrative form. The challenge for us is to formulate new stories conveying the same truths in contemporary terms. For example, the conversation around the apple tree in Eden can be retold in terms of the conflicting interactions of the different parts of the human brain, but in the exact words of Scripture.

The hindbrain is the seat of all our most ancient and automatic responses. It controls unconscious functions, like breathing and digestion, and instant reactions connected with survival and competition for status. The serpent of Eden perfectly represents how temptation manipulates our basic instincts.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?”

The woman said to the serpent, “You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.”

“You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” (Genesis 3:1-5)

The middle part of our brain is the origin of our heedless emotions and reckless ambitions. It prompted Eve to greatly desire what the serpent had promised, regardless of the consequences:

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. (Genesis 3: 6)

The forebrain is the thinking part of us, responsible for deciding how to manage our basic instincts and anticipate their consequences at a higher level than animals can. Suddenly confronted by God, Adam’s forebrain resorted to urgent back-peddalling to avoid being held responsible for imminent disaster. So he blamed not only Eve, but God himself for providing such an unsuitable companion, whereupon Eve blamed the serpent:

The man said, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it. The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” (Genesis 3:12-13).

Put like that, it all sounds so familiar.

Kim King