



Sermon preached by Revd Dr Robert Mackley on 9th June 2024

Readings: *Genesis 3:8-15, Mark 3:20-35*

Trinity II

In nomine ...

Turning 46 on Wednesday reminded me that I'm rapidly approaching physically the years that mentally I suspect I've been for a long time. I can tell this because the adverts on all the TV programmes I watch seem to be for stairlifts, saga holidays and weight loss programmes. I inform you of this today because one such weight loss advert recently informed me that with their regime, once a week I was allowed to treat myself and 'be a bit of a devil'. And it set me thinking that talk of the devil these days is often a little bit daft or camp, and rarely serious.

Yet the devil features rather a lot in today's readings – there he is as the tempting serpent in the book of Genesis and there again he is in our Gospel, with Jesus being accused by the scribes of being possessed by Satan or Beelzebub.

Now, quite a number of the healing miracles of Jesus in the Gospels, described by the writers as demonic possession, look to modern eyes suspiciously like epilepsy and may well have been so. And it would be tempting therefore simply to say that demons, like witches and bear-baiting are relics from an unenlightened, unscientific age with which we would be wise to dispense.

And of course there's much truth in that – lots of things in the past that were put down to witchcraft or devilry have been discovered to have eminently understandable causes and roots, and medicine or psychology now treat them very well or we know that it's just to do with the seasons or the weather or whatever. The last thing we should be doing is giving the impression that the church is the final bastion for believers in drowning witches or the liberal application of leeches and purging for every known disease.

But the problem is that the same empirical evidence that encourages us rightly to dismiss such things as superstitious nonsense, also encourages us to take the devil seriously. There are plenty of people who have had experiences of something which they can only describe as a sort of personal evil, those who have been to doctors and psychiatrists and in the end have only been healed by some form of exorcism.

But before we get carried away with that, it's important to get a variety of things clear. The first is that as Jesus tells us in the Gospel this morning, whoever or whatever the devil is, he has been bound, and Jesus has entered his house and plundered his goods. The word Beelzebub means 'Master of the House' and so Jesus' reference to binding the master of the house and plundering him is deliberate and precise. In other words, the victory of Jesus Christ on the Cross was the ultimate and absolute defeat of evil. Whatever the power of evil in our world today, the Christian faith tells us that it is not permanent and that it has, ultimately, already been defeated. The devil, whoever or whatever he is, is not an equal and opposite force to God – for that is the heresy of Manichaeism and it is not good news.

And it's also probably helpful to avoid thinking in terms of strange half-human figures in red with pointy tails and cloven feet. Or at least to know why people have done that in the past. That traditional imagery is there only to remind us that evil makes us less than human: the animal features are simply a teaching device to tell us that sin diminishes people, causes them to evolve backwards if you will, makes us more like than animals than humans. But of course at no time in history has the church ever taught that the devil is really like that; it's just been an image to help us understand the consequences of sin.

And all of this needs to be borne in mind and taken seriously.

But so too does talk of the devil. For a start, talk of the devil is actually a very positive thing, for it says that the present state of things is not how it has to be; the source of the worst pain and horror is not, after all, some iron necessity, but an eruption of avoidable, and therefore in the long run, healable destructiveness. It says that the choice of evil or darkness is against the grain of things and so

ultimately ridiculous: the devil knows, better than we do, what creation is all about and he says no to it – which means saying yes to chaos and emptiness, to your own nothingness. And we're not made for nonsense like that, sawing off the branch we're sitting on; when we say yes to chaos, to violence and destruction, we are being as unnatural, as insane as Lucifer.

Now these ambitious claims to know how the devil's mind works, should not be taken to be mere imaginings on my part. Of course I don't know, any more than you do, what exactly the devil is, but thinking about the devil is looking into and beyond our own compulsive untruthfulness, trying to confront our own no-saying (if you like) in its depths. As C.S. Lewis once said, all we have to do is to project just a little from what we already know of ourselves, to refine the essence of our own evil, and to admit that the energy of our sin, our saying no to creation, is a bit more than simply just the sum total of human wickedness, that there is something beyond our own individual evasions.

Yes, we can laugh off the old image and notions of the devil, and laughing at the devil is probably a good thing to do. For in the final analysis evil is ridiculous; but there is nothing the devil would like more, one suspects, than for us to believe that there is nothing more to evil than our lack of will power. It may well be that several of the disorders healed by our Lord in the Gospels were ones that we would treat medically today, but we shouldn't at the same time write off the persistent and pervasive talk of the devil by Jesus throughout the New Testament.

But to return to that evidence from people's experience for a moment. What is the Christian response to someone who is concerned about demonic possession or their house being haunted or a friend or relative getting mixed up in the occult? The first thing is to respond in the same way that we should to all situations – with wisdom and discrimination. It is still the case that the vast majority of situations are ones where medicine or psychology will be the primary source of assistance. But regardless of what we make of the situation, there is nowhere where prayer is not of value and help and shouldn't be offered; and we must always remember and remind others that no one is powerless against evil, in whatever form it comes. Jesus Christ has won the victory and calls us to apply that victory to history, to the world we live and find ourselves in now.

As the Lord tells us in our Gospel we are never alone, for we are baptised into a new family that crosses time and space – the church – the brothers and sisters of Jesus, all those who seek to do his will who are members of his family as he reminds us today. We can call on friends on earth and friends above to aid us in our prayers and in our fight for peace and justice.

For evil actually is very rarely what we see in dubious 18-rated films about ghosts and demons; rather the devil's work is to set people against one another, to encourage us to see one another as competitors for limited goods and to accrue power and possessions to ourselves to make us feel better and then to defend them, usually with violence. Above all it is to try to make us see goodness as evil, to upend our entire sense of what is right, a situation Jesus exposes this morning when he asks ironically how Satan can cast out Satan.

This Sunday Jesus calls us to return to him, to share in his life as his brothers and sisters, and, whenever we are exposed to or tempted by evil, in whatever form it comes, to rejoice that Jesus Christ has bound Satan in cords and plundered his house, and so strengthened by the Holy Spirit, to reject what is evil, and follow the only roadmap that can finally be relied upon, the Gospel, the way of Jesus Christ, and so to walk in that way until we come to the kingdom God, where he lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end.

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