

St Brandon's, Sermon for 28th January 2018

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Revelation 12.1-5; Mark 1.21-28

Evil, and God's Plan

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I really struggled to know where to go with these readings, I felt as though each told just a small bit of a bigger story that I was not being offered, had weird things I didn't understand and really different genres: a fairly boring conversation between God and Moses, a story about Jesus doing one of the healings that is much harder to relate to than most of the others, and an opening scene from some sort of blockbuster movie about super-heroes and fantastical beasts that's not really my thing. Ooof! Well, sermons are to be done, so I dug around and read and re-read the texts and what began to emerge was a picture so big, that it was a bit overwhelming to capture, and a sense that I was being challenged to believe in a bigger God and a bigger canvas than I can easily hold in my head, that was stretching my belief.

The linking theme here is that huge question of what God is going to do about evil?

If God is truly in charge over his creation, why does there seem to be such a dominance of apparently unchecked evil in the world?

The potential for humankind to act with cruelty and depravity is illustrated in so many news bulletins; to mis-appropriate power and hold individuals and entire populations in poverty, or persecute and pursue them until they have no home, no identity and little hope.

Greed and exploitation are all around us.

These are the blatant, headline happenings that can make us feel very small and powerless against the scale of them, or, remote and detached from complex issues we don't have a grasp of, happening in far off places.

But it is also on our doorsteps: generations of family that have never been employed, never known what it is to be valued and respected, young people full of untapped potential who are escaping from the hopelessness into drugs and alcohol. Squandered and spoilt lives; broken and hurting homes.

And what of ourselves?

I don't know one person here that I would imagine for a moment is going to brand themselves as evil – my lovely, loving friends, why would you?

Why should you?

And yet, that little phrase 'Its a necessary evil' can so often pop up in our lives as we choose and make our choices in the little things of life. Make our decisions about what to buy (surely it can't be that price and still be a responsible chain of supply?) We quickly sweep back under the carpet the thought that we might be buying into sweat-shop conditions, supporting shops that have been exposed for scandalous treatment of their employees. Our attitude to taxes, to satisfying our desires and pretending to ourselves that greed is need.

These are the insidious, seductive, slippery ways that evil succeeds, for a time, to subvert our better selves.

What was the original sin but a serpent that whispered to Eve in the garden of Eden that she could go against God's rule and get away with it – and she fell for it.

Its very difficult and very complicated to see how to disentangle ourselves from the prevailing socio-economic system: our lifestyles are shaped by political forces that seem to have the last word and leave no room for manoeuvre or change.

That is one of the reasons that the Book of Revelation can speak into any age and era.

The symbolic and strange images aim to unveil, or reveal, the truth by looking at it from God's heavenly perspective instead of only from our world-view.

It is one great prophesy about the way God is going to overcome the evil in the world; bring good out of bad, light out of darkness and renew his creation.

Here again, is the woman and the great serpent – just as in the garden of Eden - all goodness and all evil pitted against each other.

Only this time, who is going to win?

(By way of explanation: The woman, clothed with the sun, is not Mary but Israel and the church – she has twelve stars for the twelve tribes of Israel around her head – out of Israel's sufferings came the Messiah, and for his church he bore the pain.)

The serpent is ready to eat her child as soon as it is born but although he knocks a third of the stars (the people of God?) out of heaven with his tail in the fight, he fails, and the male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, we know to be the Messiah – Jesus, endures. And, in the pattern of great myths and legends, we instinctively know that he is to be the real challenger and victor: we know he has come to fight the dragon and will be the one to kill the dragon.

Each of the three readings in their own way tell us the same, that the rescue plan is God coming to earth in the life and work of Jesus Christ; and if we read on in the story, that his work will not stop until the last remnant of evil is overcome, and we are returned to a new garden of Eden, presented as a heavenly city where the light is the lamb.

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After the technicolour brilliance of revelation, it is a contrast and relief to revisit the conversation between God and the very grounded and practical Moses.

After their wanderings, the people of Israel are ready to settle, Moses has given them reams of detailed instructions about religious observances and regulations, in order to be a fair and just society in this new, promised land they now occupy.

But there is also a promise from God that he will raise up from among them, a prophet that will speak everything he commands, and deviating from whom will cause the person to lose their life. Again, we can recognise the promise of Jesus's coming; coming both from within the people of Israel – from a devout Jewish woman, and the absolute connection Jesus speaks of as speaking from the Father.

This absolute connection with God is what is meant by the 'authority' with which Jesus teaches in the synagogue in Capernaum, quite unlike the scribes whose job it is to interpret the law for each new situation. The content of the teaching is not recorded, is not the point, it is the magnitude of this authority astounds them – and even more – the authority extends even to having command over the unclean spirits, whom Jesus can exorcise.

In the first century AD, the belief was in evil personified as devils or bad spirits that occupied a person, it was thought power could be gained over someone by knowing their name. Hence the tactic employed by this unclean spirit is to shout Jesus' name and identity as Jesus of Nazareth, the Holy One of God. Jesus, in turn, overpowers the unclean spirit by silencing it, and powerless to oppose, it comes out at Jesus' command.

I said all this had stretched my believing, because I was asking myself some difficult questions: how could I recognise in my experience these unclean spirits? What was my language for that, or did I think the whole thing archaic?

Given the enduring truth and recognisable world and characters that Jesus mainly talks about, I don't feel I can dismiss this lightly.

Is it merely the explanation for an aggressive mental condition? Or does evil occupy a person – is it a tangible and real force in this world?

I think if I am to believe that God, and the power of love which is God, and the embodiment of that love, glory and divine goodness in Jesus Christ, then by definition, almost, I must accept the equal realness of the opposite, the dark forces of evil. Otherwise, how do we see light, if it not in contrast to, and its ability to overcome, darkness?

And how do we see love if it is not in contrast with evil; love overcoming fear, hatred and all that is destructive of relationships and life?

Yet I daren't dwell on this, I daren't look too closely for evidence of the existence of evil because I'm afraid if I do, I will somehow attract its attention to me, as if I were seeking it out. I think that probably proves how real, for me, the force of evil can be.

Then what of the cosmic battle between good and evil?

The great final conflict of God's people and God's enemies: the church and the beast?

The idea that this huge war is being fought is not really something I'd ever stopped to think about.

The scale of it is almost absurd and over dramatic, yet it is in part , probably, the mystery, magnitude and majesty of God that I am struggling with.

In messy church we sing 'My God is a great big God, and he's got us in his hands'.

How big is my God, I wonder, and I feel the need to let him expand into the very ends of the universe and beyond; to be big enough to overcome all the evil in the world; big enough to trust and follow, big enough to remove the unclean spirit in me, if I will name to him those unclean spirits and let him heal and renew me.

That is the work of the Gospel of Christ in each one of us. It is the power that brings light from darkness, will win out, and will come to illuminate the whole world.

Amen