

There is the lie but we live in the truth

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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Genesis 3:8-15; Psalm 130; 2 Corinthians 4:13 - 5:1 (2-5); Mark 3:20-35

It is so good to be in ordinary time. It is the time in our church calendar that falls outside of the seasons of advent, christmas, epiphany lent and Easter. It is only ordinary in the sense of not being during these seasons. It is actually very special as it is a time to “devote ourselves to the mystery of Christ in all its aspects” as the saying goes. It is interesting then that one of the first characters who pops up in this season is Satan. How is he or she or it related in any way to the mystery of Christ?

In preparation for this sermon I did some background reading and some web searching about Satan. There is a lot of very strange things out there besides some good information. I found sites for Satan worshippers, lots of sites, that had resources for spell casting - spells to get your lover back, get rich quick, curse your enemies and most importantly disprove Christianity and Jesus - pages and pages of the stuff. Badly written and badly argued. Do not go there. Do not go there. Aside from Satanists' web pages, which were truly scary and perplexing, I found lots of images and pictures. Satan in these pictures is often portrayed as a man/beast with horns, tail and a trident. Movies provide us with a whole other raft of images. Does anyone remember how he is portrayed in Mel Gibson's movie 'the Passion?' There he is an androgynous character, more female than male, mysterious and dark.

So much for popular media and the Internet. But what does the Bible have to say? Not a great deal actually, but something. In our Genesis reading we are introduced to the serpent, the creature who leads Eve astray and brings discord and disunity to the garden of Eden. We are not told that this is Satan, although the serpent certainly shows the primary characteristic of Satan: lies and untruth. In the Book of Job, Satan is the one who strips Job of everything he loves and then tempts Job to deny God. He is the accuser and liar. In Isaiah he is a fallen angel, the star of the morning, who tried to be on the same level with God but was cast out of heaven. This is the creature who is known as Lucifer, which means morning star in Latin.

In the Gospel reading, the scribes bring Satan into the picture, or rather they name the ruler of demons as Beelzebub, and accuse Jesus of being mad and possessed and therefore acting under the demons influence. The context of this passage helps us see what is going on. Just prior to our reading Jesus has been having overwhelming success, literally overwhelming success. A great multitude had followed Jesus to the Sea of Galilee, and people came from all over Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, Tyre, and Sidon, everywhere. The crowd was so great that Jesus had to borrow a boat lest the crowd push him into the lake. He healed various diseases and cast out unclean spirits. After selecting his disciples, he journeyed home but again the crowd gathered again at his house. There are so many he cannot even eat. His family and neighbours are now saying he is mad, out of his mind or 'beside himself' in the Greek.

It seems to me that it is not unusual for deeply committed people of faith to be termed insane or mad. In Acts, Festus said to Paul, “Paul, you are mad; your great learning is turning you mad” (Acts 26:24). Have you ever been called 'mad' for believing and doing God's work? Don't worry. You are in good company. They said just the same thing of Jesus and Paul.

But it is so very easy to call eccentric and passionate people 'mad'. It is a convenient way to keep them in a box and control them. The scribes were very keen to control this young preacher who was upsetting their world and challenging their assumptions and religion. They then go that step further and accuse him of possession and evil.

It is very important to note that there is much debate in theological circles as to whether Satan is a real being or a metaphor for all that is evil. The fact that we get scattered pictures of Satan or Beelzebub or Lucifer or the ruler of demons does not help. There is no central teaching about Satan or evil in the bible. You will also notice it is nowhere in our creed. Nowhere do we say we believe in Satan. It is not an article of faith.

Yet it seems to me evil exists. Whether it is personified in some form is debatable. One of the philosophers I admire greatly, Rene Girard, says that evil or Satan is anthropological. That is it is a purely human, cultural construct. When Paul writes about the powers and principalities that have control of our world I think he is speaking of those powers of control, injustice and oppression, violence and disunity that characterize human culture and society. Ched Myers's brilliant book *Binding the Strong Man*, his commentary on Mark's gospel, is explicit in saying that the powers are the religious and political structures of control and oppression.

This is all insightful and I think ultimately true - evil is anthropological - that is it is a human phenomenon. However, it is the definition Jesus himself has for Satan that can help us see how this all plays out in our daily lives. Jesus says in John 8.44, "Satan was a murderer from the beginning and has always hated the truth. There is no truth in him. When he lies, it is consistent with his character; for he is a liar and the father of lies." The reason why the character of Satan is so successful at lying is because he is a past master at distorting the truth. The lies are hidden in what seems real and true.

Our Genesis reading shows us our true selves from the beginning: instead of acknowledging truth and accepting responsibility for our actions the man blames the woman, and the woman blames the serpent. And the serpent is cast out. The serpent may have played the role of Satan in tempting them to eat the fruit, but then the man and woman play the role of Satan in blaming the serpent. It is story ridden with distorted truth and carefully placed lies.

A lie can sometime originate in ignorance. Ignorance does not make the lie any less false. That is, when the scribes accused Jesus of possession they probably thought he was possessed given his behaviour. After all there were so many crowds following him, he couldn't even eat!! When medical doctors of centuries ago thought possession had something to do with insanity they no doubt truly believed it. In fact most of the lies we tell and believe we see as truth. Not many of us go around telling outright lies to get what we want. Mostly we believe the lies and distorted truth because it suits our unspoken, unconscious needs and wants - our need for power and control, gold and glory, safety and love.

There are so many lies we tell ourselves and others that originate in this way. The father that calls his son an idiot and fool is not speaking truth. The son may be, just may be, acting foolishly but that does not make him an idiot. Rather the father is trying to control his child and deal with his own insecurity. He is expressing fear and anger more than speaking truth. The tragedy is the child believes this lie. The magazine that overtly and subtly tells a woman she is only beautiful and acceptable if she is 24 and a size 10 is lying. It is a lie, but we internalize that lie and we let it determine our self-image and self-esteem. The segment of a society that demonizes asylum seekers, that feels safer when they are locked up in detention and rages because a people smuggler got away no doubt believes that all this is justified and based in some truth about reality and people. When we tell ourselves that we are hopeless, useless, not good enough and not lovable enough part of us tragically believes this falsehood. When we tell ourselves the country is going to rack and ruin but we live in place that is the envy of the world with the lowest unemployment rate and the greatest wealth, the least gap between rich and poor in the developed world, a wonderful medical system and a mind boggling abundance of resources we are seriously, seriously deluded.

One of the biggest lies we tell ourselves is that we can all be safe and have peace if we make

sure the deviants, the weird, the different, the mad, the radical other, are locked up, thrown out and shunned. The lie is that we can have peace through scapegoating. It is an illusory peace and it is a great lie because it is not a true peace, only an uneasy stalemate until the next person or group is blamed and expelled.

All communities have this great lie. We create in-groups and out-groups, us and them, the righteous and the damned, the sexually pure and the corrupt, the Jew and Christian, Shia and Sunni, atheist and believer, anglo-catholic and evangelical. Even when we couch our language in phrases that speak of love and light, non-judgmentalism and acceptance, we can still be sizing people up and deciding they do not quite fit with who we are and what we want to achieve. Heaven help the lawyer who wants to join a hippy commune and still look, dress and act like a lawyer.

And what is the result of the game of lies we play? A divided humanity. A humanity that is forever divided between good and bad, the right and the wrong, sinner and saint, or however else we want to divide them, but we will always thus be divided. The ultimate end of such division is a house that cannot stand, a family that is fractured and weak.

And so into our world of lies comes Jesus. He is this blinding light that shines into the darkness of our lies, the evil of our falsehoods, the destructive power of satan in and amongst us. In a world of lies he is truth. He clears our perceptions and helps us see things as they are. He overthrows Satan by revealing the truth. When his culture and religion told him the lepers and prostitutes were unclean and to avoid them for fear of contamination he ignored this distortion. He touched, ate with them and loved them. When his friends and families wanted to draw him back into the safety of their circle and brotherhood he said, 'these are my brothers and sisters, my mother, my family'. When the dominant world view said hate and punish your enemies and those you believe have done you wrong he ignored that deception and forgave - completely. His forgiveness, his act of self-sacrifice, opened our eyes to the truth: the truth that we tell lies and act like our lies are the truth. This is why Jesus is so radically different and so threatening to the scribes, the people with power and authority who declared who was OK and who was not, who believed the lies they were told and perpetuated their influence and power. Instead Jesus embodied compassion and forgiveness and brought the possibility of true peace.

You know I heard a great truth this weekend. It was told to me by one of the patients in the local nursing home. Perhaps it was the context that made the truth shine out. One of the hardest things and one of the most wonderful things I do each week is the service at this home. It is a secure facility for dementia patients. The people there, in many ways, could be classified mad, out of their mind. They say and do strange and wonderful things. It is confronting to many people. I am deeply confronted. It confronts me with my mortality, my prejudices, my need to be surrounded by safe people. Although it is a good facility and the staff do their very best it confronts me with the fact that we undervalue the old in our community and under resource their care. We all want to live the lie that the successful, strong, healthy, able, young and beautiful are more valuable than any one else. At the nursing home is this gentleman who to all intents and purposes has, for most of his life, been considered mad and eccentric - and that's before he ended up in a dementia facility. Yet each week he has a word for Robin and I. His words are always somehow grounded in his faith in Christ. This week he said, "Pastor, this is what I want to say, 'everything is basically perfect for God is the ground of everything'".

That this person, in his circumstances, could have this insight, this assurance, was miraculous. That he could see beyond the illusion and falsehood of human ideology and perfectionism was wonderful. That he could point me to faith and trust was an extraordinary gift. Behind the

lies we tell and are told there is another realm. A place of truth and goodness. May the Lord Jesus open our hearts to this truth. Amen.