

Third Sunday after Pentecost - 2018

As I considered today's readings with Bible in one hand and newspaper in the other it was mental health, my own, and that of others that came to the fore. I was heartened by Paul's writings to the Corinthians: So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.

At the clergy conference on preaching just recently we were warned about telling jokes. So I won't tell a joke, but I was surfing YouTube during the week and came across Rowan Atkinson as the devil. He introduces himself as Toby and proceeds in a rather kind and gentle way to separate folk, clipboard in hand: thieves, pillagers, lawyers - over here. Atheists, Christians... yes, the Jews were right! Over there... Wonderful comedy. It reminded me of what a significant figure the devil is in our culture, a hard image to shift. But in ignoring this image, or like Luther laughing at it or throwing an ink pot at it, are we in danger of ignoring the reality behind it?

I conducted a baptism yesterday here at St Philip's. As is often the case with such occasions it is difficult to get parents and Godparents together to prepare them for their role and so we end up having a chat before the service about what are weighty matters. Matters that should be given much more time and consideration.

Do you turn to Christ?

I turn to Christ.

Do you repent of your sins?

I repent of my sins.

Do you reject selfish living, and all that is false and unjust?

I reject them all.

Do you renounce Satan and all evil?

I renounce all that is evil.

Given that even us 'churched' folk rarely use the language of the last two questions it is little wonder that parents and Godparents bringing their little ones for baptism are sometimes reticent about making such bold statements. So part of my discussion with sponsors revolves around what they want for their children and Godchildren. Naturally they want them to be happy, no bad thing. How is this happiness to be gained I ask? The psychologists and philosophers both tell us that happiness is gained when we lead lives that have both meaning and purpose, when our relationships are sound. Does not the Christian faith offer both, I suggest? And do the last questions suggest our rejection of anything which undermines this?

I have a great deal of sympathy for the family of Jesus in today's passage from Mark's gospel. Jesus has returned to the district and has a huge gathering around him, so many indeed that the house is full and his family cannot even get close. They are naturally worried for him, they have heard rumours about his behaviour and he has clearly caught the attention of the

authorities. Little wonder his family are concerned, he has distanced himself from them and they are worried about his mental health.

I have it on good authority that the word used today for fruit in the narrative about the Garden of Eden could mean apple or evil – it's a question I am told of the length of the vowels! Clearly the taking of the fruit, the apple or fig or whatever is above all symbolic. It speaks of the reality of evil which was a given for the people of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments and thereby hangs something of the problem that we have with the texts presented to us this morning and the question asked of our baptismal sponsors; the reality of evil. Given our readings is it not the opposite of meaning, purpose and relationship?

The issues of the fall and the role of Eve and the perennial issue of Jesus as exorcist have not always been dealt with well by the Church. They are both issues which have the potential for us to be ignored at best, derided by the wider world at worst. We have responded by either ignoring the texts, taking a fundamentalist position or speaking about such things as culturally significant in their day, but not for us today. I think we as Anglicans have engaged with both these issues but we still struggle with the reality of evil. It is this that links our readings today, the Genesis account of the serpent and account of Jesus binding the power of that serpent, who Mark embodies as 'the strong man.'

John Wesley famously said 'no Devil, no God,' it was for him as simple as that and I think there is *some* truth in that. However, we speak very freely about the attributes of God, love, truth, justice etc. but we are coy about speaking about the embodiment of hatred, falsity, injustice and indeed we should be for good reason. We are called as Christians to embody love, truth, justice etc., and to find in them meaning and purpose in our lives. What of selfish living, and all that is false and unjust, what of Satan and evil?

These are weighty matters and in thinking about them I have had to turn to a weighty theologian, to Karl Barth. For Barth, following Augustine, evil is futility, vanity, emptiness, nothingness. It is that which passes away. It is the absurd nothingness which God refuses to interpret or explain or endow with meaning. It "is" only in as much as God rejects it utterly. It "exists" only as that which God vanquishes and overcomes in the death of his Son, which we see foreshadowed today in Jesus binding the strong man.

Jesus' family only wanted the very best for him, as we all do for our families and friends, no doubt in their way they wanted him to have a life with meaning and purpose and relationship. But they failed to understand in his life and ultimately in his death that is exactly what he was doing but not just for himself but for his 'wider' family. Jesus had bound the strong man whose power had held sway, in doing so he made of nothingness the evil

that threatens us, the evil that takes away meaning, purpose and relationship, those things that are part of God's will for us all.

Paul's words of comfort to the Corinthians should resonate with us 'So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day'. So we do not lose heart, the power of evil, despite its presence in our world and its ability to dishearten and to impact in so many ways including our own mental well-being, has no meaning or purpose; Christ has bound it up and for that we give thanks. Amen.