

# Exorcising Demonic Rivalry

Sermon for the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany, Year B, 7 February 2021  
St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor, ACT, Australia

## The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Coddell

Isaiah 40: 21-31; Psalm 147: 1-11; 1 Corinthians 9: 16-23; Mark 1: 29-39

**+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.**

The story is told that during the Paris riots of 1848, an army officer received orders to evacuate a certain Square by firing upon the 'rabble'. He left the garrison with his troops and started for the Square to be cleared. Upon his arrival, he took up a position with his soldiers who raised their guns to fire upon the crowd. In the profound silence that followed, he cried out: 'I have received the order to fire upon the rabble; but as I perceive before me many honest people, I ask them to depart so that I may execute this order'. In a few moments the Square was vacant.<sup>1</sup>

This is a wonderful story and a very encouraging one, at a time when rivals increasingly settle into invincible positions, and I sometimes despair of how we can ever get beyond this dangerous impasse.

---

<sup>1</sup> Pierre d'Elbée, "Obeying Bad Orders and Saving Lives: The Story of a French Officer" *Contagion* 6 (1999), 45-54, p. 45.

Conspiracy theorists occupy crazy positions, sacrificing every last shred of objective truth and common decency to maintain a grievance-fuelled rage against their hated rivals. Some will die rather than give their opponents an inch, like Ashli Babbitt who was shot dead by a policeman during the US Capitol siege. She was an angry QAnon devotee who'd been tweeting that Joe Biden was a paedophile. Then there's Georgia Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Green, who believes that lasers mounted on Jewish orbital satellites caused the last round of California wildfires, and that the Sandy Hook school massacre was a covert act by democrats aimed at undermining support for gun rights. Or you may remember One Nation Senator Malcolm Roberts arguing against scientific evidence for climate change on Q&A, up against an increasingly exasperated Professor Brian Cox.

You can't seem to win with these people. Indeed, rabid ideologues sometimes just have to be put down by force, as was the case with Nazism in World War II. Though some supporters of conspiracy theories can be won over and

convinced to stand down. Very occasionally, even one of the chief protagonists of these insane views will be persuaded to change their tune.

My story of a French officer shows that self-defining rivalries and entrenched positions *aren't* invincible—that de-escalation, even change of heart, *is* possible. The tit-for-tat rivalries that possess people can be exorcised; these demonic powers still yield to the critical, psychological and spiritual power that emerges most clearly in Jesus Christ. And as far as I'm concerned, this represents the greatest miracle of all.

The French officer story is explored by a practitioner of conflict resolution called Pierre d'Elbée. Here's how he explains what's going on.

The officer knows that these people before him are not rabble, and the crowd knows that he knows. The crowd does not for all that renounce its basic opposition, and the officer respects that decision by not making any allusion to it. His declaration is in no way an argument, but rather an invitation to avoid confrontation by mutual respect. While

taking the crowd seriously, the officer mocks his superiors with the crowd by asking indirectly of the rogues to not budge while the ‘honest people’ leave the Square. This good-natured pleasantry is charged with benevolence. The crowd is touched, it understands the invitation of the officer and consents to it, for it has permitted them to leave with their heads held high. They accept being saved and defer their struggle.<sup>2</sup>

Now, friends, it seems to me that this whole dilemma, and this potential solution to it, is what we see playing out in today’s readings. The Epiphany of Jesus Christ continues to reveal new aspects in this season, and today we see his power and wisdom at work in miracles of reconciliation, banishing the demons of rivalry, the madness of mutually assured destruction.

Let’s start with St Paul in our Epistle today, who we see caught up in a major Church conflict. Paul is standing on his dig, not yielding his authority in the Corinthian Church, but he does this in a way that prevents rivalry from escalating and taking hold. He makes a case for Church leaders like him

---

<sup>2</sup> art.cit. p. 50.

to be able to make a living at it—something our parish priests still typically do to this day. But then Paul refuses to insist on it, since no doubt such payments had obviously become a bone of contention. Paul doesn't claim his rights, to avoid fuelling rivalry with his opponents.

Then he goes on with that strange speech about being all things to all people. Paul refuses to set himself up in self-defining opposition to others in the Church—to the Jews under the law he's one of them, yet he's not separating himself from the gentile Christians who don't follow the Jewish law. Likewise, he sides with the weak—such as those we heard about last week, for instance, whose consciences troubled them about the widespread practice of eating meat that you could buy after it had been offered to idols. Paul insists on being all things to all people so that his mission as an agent of their salvation won't be hindered. This doesn't mean that he makes himself a doormat or a pushover, however—Paul could never be accused of that. He's simply faithful to the Gospel, and he has his own neediness well under control.

I remember times when I failed this challenge, in parish and theological college leadership, so that I ended up in rivalry with people over whose emotional needs would be met, theirs or mine. It's the same siege mentality that engulfs a family, whenever immature teenagers and scarcely more mature parents end up locked in mutual antagonism, each nursing their hurts and their unexamined, unaddressed neediness. But not so for Paul, and no longer for me anymore either, once I'd woken up to this spiritual and theological lesson back in my mid-forties.

But let me be very clear. I'm not offering secular good advice here, as if these miracles of human transformation—healing families and Churches and nations—can easily happen if we just master the right techniques. We're dealing with the most intractable manifestations of sin here: the addiction to self-justification, possessed by a dysfunctional craving to blow up the other rather than examine ourselves; the tendency to demonise and monsterise the other while failing to see that we've become just the same as them *really*. Because the

deeper we sink into rivalry, the more indistinguishable we become from our rival—the more we become *possessed by our rival*, and them by us.

God has the power to overcome this all-too-familiar form of demonic possession and return his people from exile—in the culture wars, for example, and from every other hellhole of bitter alienation. Isaiah in our Old Testament reading today tells a story of such return from exile, along a purpose-built high road back to the holy city, and what we find there is germinal to what I'm saying.

Today's Isaiah passage is distinctive in bringing together God's covenant and God's creation, with the wonders of creation invoked as a pointer to the wonderful things our God is capable of doing. So, creation in the Old Testament shouldn't be read as pre-scientific fantasy, but as testimony to the power of our God to make all things come right, which is meant here to embolden and strengthen a weakened Israel. And you see today's Psalm picking up the same theme—the wonder of stars and weather and animal life join

in testimony to the saving capacity of Israel's God. We're not stuck with a chronically divided world, and neither are we stuck with having to fix it through our own strength and wisdom alone. Our God is on the case.

And so, I come to today's Gospel. The demons are silenced and driven out, as Jesus' emancipation of human beings begins. I'm reading demonic possession here along the lines I've been setting out: people possessed by rivalry, obsessed, driven literally mad in their grievances, destructive of themselves and others. And there's no easy remedy, the situation is a dire one. But Jesus making present God's liberating love and righteousness, giving us an identity in baptism so we don't have to forge our own in a life of rivalry and exclusion, is able to overcome this evil. And so of course the demons are silenced, because rivalry declines whenever it's starved of oxygen. When all the stupid talk and accusations cease, this escalating rivalrous dynamic is nipped in the bud.

I note in particular that Jesus is wary of the crowd in today's Gospel, the way it urgently presses on him. Crowds have a mind of their own, which very quickly possesses the minds of crowd members. Crowds are easily whipped up, manipulated, and led where many crowd members might otherwise be unwilling to go. All this we saw most recently in the US Capitol insurrection. As the Senate prosecution brief against Donald Trump for this week's impeachment trial puts it (and I quote), he "summoned a mob to Washington, exhorted them into a frenzy and aimed them like a loaded cannon down Pennsylvania Avenue."

It's significant, then, that Jesus abandons the crowd and goes off on his own to pray, to escape the contagion of populism. And when his mission begins it's low key, person by person, as with Peter's mother-in-law in today's Gospel, and then synagogue by synagogue, village by village. There's no social media storm, no million-man march.

So, friends, there is a way beyond the crisis in which we find ourselves in today's world of politics and the culture wars,

also on a more familiar level in Churches, like Paul's Church at Corinth, and in families. Jesus the great emancipator frees human beings from their possession by rigid rivalries, their exile in irretrievable situations. He embodies this saving mission of Isaiah's God, whose power in creation is also a power for liberation, as we see today in Isaiah's testimony about the return of God's people from exile. Our Eucharist enacts this emancipation, making it our weekly springboard into a different way of living. Our vocation as Christians going out from the Eucharist is to be agents of this remarkable possibility.

The Lord be with you ...