

Binding the Strong Man

Sermon for the Second Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, 6 June 2021

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

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

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

I saw a news story through the week about a boating incident in America that gives us a good insight into the human condition, and which can help us understand today's challenging set of readings. Some people were out on the lake in a boat displaying a gay pride flag, and another flag with the LGBTIQ rainbow—it was Pride Week. Some rednecks started harassing them, circling their boat again and again while calling out abuse. Then, unexpectedly, the rednecks' speedboat caught fire and suddenly blew up, leaving its abusive occupants in danger of drowning. You guessed it, the gay pride boat then went over and they fished the rednecks out, taking them ashore to safety. Whereupon, having said nothing the whole way, they stalked off without a word of thanks.

Here we see the mentality of the bigot and the conspiracy theorist, who can only see things one way and who can't be convinced to think otherwise. They're so invested in their fantasy version of

reality—a fantasy in which everyone else is to blame but them, in which they’ve got nothing to answer for—that nothing can budge them from their invincible state of grievance and resentment.

They’re like Adam and Eve in today’s dreamtime story from Genesis, who’d resented God telling them that they couldn’t eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, who’d resented the gross insult of being told that they weren’t God, so they’d given in to their resentment and eaten the fruit, with him then passing the buck to her, and her to the snake. And see what they got for it: a life of struggle ever after, with a poisoned imagination that left them suspicious and contemptuous of God, never able to get free of disappointment and bitterness.

They’d made their choice, in a story that’s about all of us really, not just two representative individuals way back when. And people are still stuck in this same prison of sin and alienation today. Although of course, like Adam and Eve, we can’t typically recognise our resentment and our folly and the alienation that comes from it, so we nurse our grievances and we blame others—don’t we, Mr Speaker?

We see another example of it in today’s Gospel, with the Scribes, the religious experts of the day. They hated Jesus because they knew in

their bones that he wasn't part of their world, that he didn't buy their BS, and so they resolutely set about undermining and discrediting him.

They couldn't deny his power so they denied its source, accusing Jesus of being in league with Satan. Here's a conspiracy theory as fresh as anything I read in my daily news emails from *The New York Times* and *The New Republic*. It's like the QAnon supporters accusing dear old Joe Biden of being a blood-sucking paedophile. It's like every shocking excess of anti-Semitism, ancient and modern. It's like hating gays even when the gay pride crew are pulling you out of the water and saving your life. Poor Mary and Jesus' siblings in today's gospel—or if you're Roman Catholic, his cousins. They want Jesus out of there, because they see the confrontation that's coming. But this is why Jesus came, to take it up to the world of BS so that we could be broken out of it. He doesn't play the Scribes' game; he makes clear that their claim about Jesus really representing Beelzebub makes no sense.

But you can't argue a conspiracy theorist out of their invincible ignorance, can you? You have to tackle the problem at its root, exposing the whole deluded and self-serving kingdom of lies so thoroughly and so finally that people will eventually see it for what it is and find their way out of it.

Friends, this is the breakthrough of Easter, as the cross reveals the violent lies so often found at the heart of culture and religion. Easter breaks the spell of violent payback and infinitely prolonged resentment with its cosmic triumph of love over evil and over the conformity-maintaining threat of death. This is what Jesus means in today's Gospel with that wonderful image from the world of home invasion, from the breaking and entering playbook: the image of binding the strong man, so that Jesus can get in and plunder his house.

As Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians today, we Christians share in a weight of glory that overbalances the power of evil, the power of death, which I suggest in the context of today's other readings means the power to silence us and make us settle for a quiet life in the world of BS. Paul extols a power available to us that's beyond what can be seen, beyond the struggle and decay that threatens to defeat and overwhelm human life—like the struggle to which we humans have consigned ourselves according to Genesis today, endless and futile, with our imaginations darkened.

Instead, Christ frees us to enjoy a life beyond the endless cycle of grievance, resentment, self-delusion and blaming others, with risk aversion as our chief virtue. This is the life our God opens for us in

baptism when we renounce Satan and all his works, the empty display and false values of the world. And this is the Eucharistic life, which inclines our imaginations to lavishness rather than austerity, to solidarity rather than suspicion, and to forgiveness rather than endlessly nursed hurts—the Eucharistic life in which we truly become Jesus’ family: his brother, his sister, his mother.

Because the strong man has been bound. The satanic charade—that is, the system based on conspiracy and BS that stubbornly refuses the liberating truth—has been exposed and undone by Jesus Christ. And, friends, you and I are the plunder. You and I have been rescued and retrieved from that bleak house—the one in which so many still choose to live, like those American rednecks in their exploding boat.

As Jesus makes clear in today’s Gospel, there’s no life with God for those who stubbornly insist on living that way, resisting every overture of love. But not for us, who have been broken out of this death spiral. Not for us, who can stand firm in a posture of resistance, saying with today’s psalmist “I wait for the Lord, my soul waits for him: and in his word is my hope.”

The Lord be with you...