

## THE DEVIL Lent 1 2018

I was at a meeting the other day – they were all clergy and apart from the usual chat about who’s moving where and when, and the latest gossip – sorry, news! – from around the diocese, one topic, surprisingly, did raise its head and that was – The Devil! And before you begin to wonder what strange practices were being proposed by people in black shirts, how it came up was the result of a Bible Study on a chapter of the Book of Revelation!

And at the beginning of Lent, as we hear about and reflect on the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness we read, as in today’s Gospel, that Jesus “was in the wilderness for 40 days and was tempted by the devil.”

What are we to make of this statement? Is evil a person or a power?

It’s a relevant question because, as one writer has pointed out, “whether we believe in the devil or not, every human being is confronted by the problem of evil and searches for an explanation.”

Only in this last week news has to come to us of suicide bombers killing 18 people in Nigeria and a teenager in Florida killing 17 in his school. Or maybe we have been confronted by evil closer to home.

In the Bible evil is personalised in the form of Satan or the devil.

The Book of Revelation gives us, perhaps, the fullest description. It says that Satan was originally one of God’s angels, one of God’s trusted lieutenants, like Michael and Gabriel, but not content to be a messenger for God, to do God’s bidding, Satan tried to be better than God and to dethrone God and put himself in God’s place. And was expelled from heaven for his rebellion.

And Revelation goes on to say that Satan “was thrown down to earth and his angels were thrown with him” where in his wrath he tries to thwart and undo the purposes of God and wreak havoc wherever he can.

Now there are two points I would like to make about this account or explanation:-

The first is that the Jewish people were not philosophers – like the Greeks. The Jews didn’t deal in abstract thoughts but in parables and stories. Abstract ideas were explained in flesh and blood stories, and so in the Biblical account evil is personified as Satan or the devil, or as in the book of Revelation, as a great red dragon with horns and a tail.

The second point that is important to make is that in the Biblical account Satan was originally part of God’s creation. One of God’s angels, a good guy who later became a bad guy.

And that point is important because good and evil are not two independent forces in our world, there from the beginning of time, slugging it out to see which will win in the end.

Evil exists, because God, endowed everything and everyone with free will, able to choose whether to obey God's laws or to reject God's laws. To be in relationship with God or not.

All created things have the freedom to develop.

As one scientist theologian put it in a recent book, "All events in the universe, whether involving humans or not, have some capacity for free choice." (*David Wilkinson, a doctor in both astrophysics and theology, in "When I pray, what does God do?"*)

So, evil is not some outside force trying to lead us astray and into wrong, but rather, evil is, in fact, a force within us, internal to our make-up.

It's not some unseen leering devil with horns and a forked tail trying to trip us up and go against God, but evil comes from our own desires and wants warring within us.

But it's easier for us to blame some outward force rather than ourselves, to use the devil as a scapegoat rather than take full responsibility for our actions and choices.

We hear people say, 'The devil made me do it', or 'someone is full of devilment', 'or we have a devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other' when in reality it is personal choice.

This image of Satan has been used down the years to keep people in their place. You only have to look at Dante's *Inferno* to know that fear was stirred up about an outside source of evil and therefore a source of control.

As one writer put it, "Evil is conceived and born in the human heart." (*Gerald Hughes*)

It's a bit like bowling. The bowl, whether the smaller one for grass or the larger one for the bowling alley, has a bias on one side which makes it turn rather than go in a straight line. So we, as humans, seem to have a bias inside us which, if not recognised and corrected by the choices that we make, turns us to what is wrong and away from what is good and true.

I also believe it is possible to nurture evil in other people. If a child grows up believing it is ok to beat women, to treat others as inferior, that only their interests are the important ones what moral framework does that child have to know that there beliefs and attitudes are wrong – it is not impossible to find good but it will be a battle. There is a huge responsibility on all of us to be an example of good and not evil in our words and actions.

So what we see happening in the Temptations of Jesus in the desert is not Jesus having a debate with another being, Satan, but Jesus wrestling within himself over how best he can reach people with the knowledge and love of God.

Will he give them what they want rather than what they need? Bedazzle them with mighty feats, or become an autocratic dictator? Or will he appeal to their higher natures by teaching and living the ethic of love and self-giving?

Internal debates within his mind, explained in the Bible's way by picturing a conversation between Jesus and another person, Satan. Evil in our lives comes not from without but from within. As Jesus himself said, later in the Gospel of Mark, "For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come." (7:21)

One of the challenges for us of Lent is that we take responsibility for our own actions and choices. To refer to that much quoted line from Shakespeare, "The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in the stars but in ourselves."

Yes, it's easier to blame someone or something else, but in reality, in truth, we are responsible for our own choices. God has given us the capacity for free choice. We make our own decisions, and though there may be a bias within us and without us, we keep to the straight and narrow by attending to God and to his word - a challenge not only for Lent but for all the year through.

But a challenge that is accompanied by the promise that God's love is freely and openly given to each one of us. I think one of the most reassuring verses is found in Romans chapter 8 – 'nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord'.