

Sermon

Sunday 10 June 2018

Lessons

Genesis 3: 8 – 15

St Mark 3: 19b - 35

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Eternal *ruach*, Breath of God, bless our meditations; nourish our imagination; and fill us to overflowing with the peace, the shalom, of Your Spirit. Amen.

In the Gospel of St Mark, the scribes of Jerusalem accused Jesus of demonic possession: 'He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons'. Jesus challenged the scribes, 'How can Satan cast out Satan?' Do you believe in satanic possession, in the power of Satan? Do you believe in demons? In the Book of Revelation, in the prophetic poetry of mythology, the author wrote:

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and locked and sealed it over him, so that he would deceive the nations no more, until the thousand years were ended.

Earlier, we are told that the dragon was a great red dragon with seven heads and ten horns. Today's lesson began with the suggestion that Jesus was out of His mind. In our society, if we went around speaking of a fallen angel, a dragon, the Devil, Satan and

demonic possession, many would think us mentally ill: 'out of our mind'. In the Gospel of Luke, when the seventy apostles returned to Jesus having fulfilled their mission, when they returned with joy that they had cast out demons, Jesus told them, 'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.' In Christian tradition, the ancient serpent of Revelation is the serpent of Genesis which enticed Eve to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil at the centre of Eden. In the Jewish Talmud Satan has a central role in the gruesome story of the binding of Isaac and, for some, it was Satan who led the Hebrew people astray when Moses prayed on Mount Sinai. Do you believe in the existence of Satan and in the power of Satan?

Much of the language in Scripture is the poetic prose of mythology; it is faith narrative. The literal reading of Scripture is a lethal trap; the Church seems caught in its steel jaws unable to free itself. In the 13th century, the Jewish philosopher Maimonides said that he did not believe that Satan existed. The word Satan, he said, derives from the Hebrew root meaning 'turn away'. Satan is a symbol of sin; it is a symbol of turning away from God. In the Book of Job in which God and Satan speak to each other, Maimonides said that this is nothing more than a parable; a literary device. In Hebrew, the word for

Satan is usually translated as opponent or adversary. As we approach the stories, the faith narratives, of Adam and Eve and Jesus and Beelzebul, we must do so with imagination and not a literal mindset. The name Beelzebul is drawn from the Canaanite king Baal and is sometimes rendered Baalzebub. A derogatory term, Baalzebub means 'lord of flies' because the wisdom of Canaanite priests was no more than listening to the buzz of flies.

Steeping away from a literal reading of Scripture, in the Jewish mystical tradition, the story of Adam and Eve is understood in similar terms to that of yin and yang in Eastern religion. The language of Adam and Eve is of outward and inward, light and dark. The serpent, Satan, represents the force of fragmentation. In Kabbalistic teaching, Satan is a crucial element required for creation because without it everything would unite with God; everything would be one with God with no differentiation. In the ancient myth, it is the serpent, it is Satan, that creates true distance between humanity and God; it is Satan who gives us consciousness. These myths have far deeper, more profound implications than we might see at first glance. And, importantly, they are open to more than one interpretation. Imagination, trained imagination, is a gift from God.

Satan, then, is a turning away from God. In the Gospel of St Mark, Jesus said, 'Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness'. In Jewish thought of the period, in the Book of Enoch, sins against God were unforgiveable because God, the Spirit of God, created life and community. Jesus was a master poet and I don't believe He meant that God was so precious as to be unforgiving: hyperbole and metaphor are everywhere in His teaching. His point was that to sin against the Life-Giver, to turn one's face away from God, was spiritual death. Turning away from the call to grow into fullness of life as a human being is not just wrong; it is a sin, a failure to live as the God-filled creatures we are.

Satan, the Devil, the serpent, the seven-headed red dragon may not be out there in the ether among the clouds but turning away from God is. In the Book of Genesis, after being enticed by the serpent, Adam said to God, 'I heard the sound....I was afraid....I was naked.....I hid myself'. At the heart of the world's troubles is the human ego. We are a paradox, we need that ego, that desire to fulfill our needs and wants in order to survive in an evolutionary universe and yet it is

this same selfish desire which, untamed, harms and destroys others and, ultimately, ourselves.

The philosopher John Gray was critical of those who described Saddam Hussein as evil. Gray writes:

If their feverish rhetoric means anything, it is that evil can be vanquished. In believing this, those who govern us at the present time reject a central insight of western religion, which is found also in Greek tragic drama and the work of the Roman historians: destructive human conflict is rooted in flaws within human beings themselves. In this old-fashioned understanding, evil is a propensity to destructive and self-destructive behaviour that is humanly universal. The restraints of morality exist to curb this innate human frailty....Dealing with evil requires an acceptance that it never goes away.

Every human advance carries with it the potential for more evil; an obvious example being nuclear weapons. Churches across the world want the highest and best for humanity and keep fracturing into an ever-increasing number of denominations. The number of Humanist societies in Scotland continues to grow; there are fractious fallouts. The Communist and atheist regime of the Soviet Union sought to overthrow injustice and ended by murdering millions of its own citizens. Patriotism can lift human beings to the height of self-transcendence; we can choose to die for the lives of others. Yet, patriotism, unquestioning devotion to the State, can be self-defeating.

In a world of drastic climate change or a nuclear war, the pressure on us to survive, to survive ahead of others, would be irresistible.

Human beings are a paradox: Beelzebul and Jesus are both within us.

We face the choice to turn away from God or stop and turn to God.

Sister Clare, who became the Reverend Mother of an Anglican religious order and led a life of contemplative prayer, would regularly describe how she came to join the order. During the Second World War, at the height of the blitz when the docks in Cardiff were being bombed, she served as a nurse amid the explosions and fire and suffering. She said she realised that the real battle was not in the air between the Allied and Nazi planes, not even on the ground between soldiers. It was a spiritual battle that had to be fought; at the heart of the struggle was prayer. D H Lawrence said, 'All that matters is to be at one with the Living God'. The struggle which we face, which the whole of humanity faces, is an inner struggle:

Beelzebul or Jesus; selfish survival or self-transcendence? Jesus said, 'Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother'.

We are invited to follow Him everyday.

Amen.