

28.05.17

Your adversary, the devil

So there I was at the beginning of the week, looking over the passage I had chosen for today's service, these verses from the 1st letter of Peter. Written to a community that is clearly suffering opposition and persecution for its faith in Christ, it includes these words, 'like a roaring lion you adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.' Well, how quaint, we might think. These ancient people with their superstitious beliefs! We live today in more enlightened times when we can banish all talk of devils and demons and supernatural agents of evil. All that hardly fits with our high-tech world. It's is a throwback to a primitive, ancient cosmology where dark and dangerous forces preyed on human life and the world was imagined as a battleground between cosmic powers of good and evil. Then came Monday night, and the events in Manchester - nothing new, but following similar outrages all over the planet, and I found myself wondering about these verses afresh. I found myself thinking again about the devil, our adversary, prowling and devouring.

You see, I don't think that we in our modern, enlightened world know how to handle evil or to make sense of it. Yes, we dismiss ancient mythological talk of devils and demons, but it leaves us with an explanatory vacuum. Quite simply, there are times when evil baffles us. I'm reminded of a quote by one of our other adversaries, the atheist crusader Richard Dawkins, who complains of religion thus. He writes, 'What worries me about religion is that it teaches people to be satisfied with not understanding the world they live in'. Get that? The charge is that religion prevents us from understanding the world we live in. It's an obstacle to understanding. And the assumption is of course that it is science that gives us true understanding. Science is the great key that unlocks the universe and all that is. And science undoubtedly does give us true understanding of the world – of course - but does it give us a full and complete understanding? Dawkins and others insist that it does. But does it? What can science say about evil?

You see, part of the problem here is that science deals with the rational. Science and reason go hand in hand and indeed this is science's boast – that it rests upon the secure foundations of rationality and will have no truck with the irrational. It's no surprise therefore that Dawkins speaks of faith as 'belief

without evidence or reason’, which, he claims, is also the definition of delusion. So reason is everything and we can have no truck with any explanations that do not conform to our canons of rationality. And I’m reminded of that great 18th century picture by the Spanish artist Francisco Goya entitled, ‘The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters’, which shows a sleeping figure surrounded by flapping beasts. Allow reason to sleep and you will be plagued and haunted by monsters, and that might serve as a summary of the Enlightenment mentality that is rapidly becoming the default setting of the modern mindset. The trouble is, however, that there are monsters that are not produced by the sleep of reason, monsters that reason has no grasp of or control over whatsoever.

The holocaust survivor Eli Wiesel once interviewed the judge who presided at the trial of the Nazi Adolf Eichmann, one of the architects of the holocaust. And Wiesel asked the judge if he understood what had happened in the calculated, genocidal murder of six million Jews. ‘No, not at all’, replied the judge. ‘I know the facts and the events... I know how the tragedy unfolded minute by minute, but this knowledge, as if coming from outside, has nothing to do with understanding. There is in all this a kind of forbidden zone, inaccessible to reason...’ ‘A forbidden zone, inaccessible to reason!’ That surely says it all about evil. And to our secularist friends who are quick to accuse Christian belief of irrationality we reply that there are limits to rationality and there are aspects of reality that are beyond its grasp, that reason cannot account for. In the wake of a horror like Manchester there is so much analysis, so much discussion, so much reflection on what has happened as if this in some way might help make sense of what has happened. So there is endless raking over the life of the suicide bomber, Salman Abedi – his background, his childhood, what might have radicalised him, interviews with people who knew him, what he was like at school, and it’s an attempt to rationalise and make some sense of his actions. But at the end of the day there is something here that defies reason and that confounds us.

So what are we to make of evil? How do we begin to engage with it? Well, I would begin, firstly, with a phrase used by Paul in the New Testament where he says that ‘we do not wrestle against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers’. And whatever else that might mean it suggests that we are dealing here with something not only beyond the rational but also beyond the natural, something in the spiritual realm that goes beyond the grasp

of science and human comprehension. So there is something about the holocaust, and other genocides, and something about incidents like 9/11 and what happened in Manchester last Monday and what has happened elsewhere for which the language of the demonic is perfectly appropriate. We are dealing here with something that transcends flesh and blood. And it seems that we come up against a rather strange kind of contradiction here. The Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt famously coined a phrase in a book she wrote about Adolph Eichmann and his role in the holocaust. The phrase was ‘the banality of evil’, and she was referring to the disturbing fact that such great evil is perpetrated by such ordinary people, people with families and loved ones and pets, yet people for whom such brutality became normal and routine – just a case of ‘the way things are done’. And here is the rather strange tension. On the one hand there is the banality of evil, the sheer mundane ordinariness of it. And yet on the other hand there is the transcendent dimension, the cosmic, tragic mystery of it all that dwarfs human understanding. And that tension is reflected in our language about evil, our discourse. On the one hand we speak of the devil and the demonic in an almost banal way, as a lion prowling and devouring, and that runs the risk of belittling and trivialising what we are confronted with. But the very simplicity and inadequacy of the language we use only heightens our sense of the enormity of what it is we are trying to talk about.

That brings us secondly to one feature of evil. If we go back to the Book of Genesis at the beginning of the Bible we find there the story of the murder of Abel by his brother Cain. Cain is angry and resentful of Abel and God warns him with these words, ‘Sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you...’ I’m struck by that image. ‘Sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you...’ This conveys a sinister and malevolent force lurking, waiting at Cain’s door to pounce. It chimes with Peter’s image of the lion searching to devour and let’s ponder this image for a moment. The great 4th century theologian Augustine of Hippo could not entertain the idea of God allowing anything evil in creation and was unwilling to recognise evil as in any kind of substantial force in the world. And so he spoke of evil with the Latin term ‘privatio boni’ – the absence of good, just as darkness has no power of its own, being but the absence of light. And that preserves the goodness of creation, but I wonder if it does justice to the aggressive and militant force of evil: it’s sheer destructive power. It seems not to be just an absence but to have a life of its own, a kind of

initiative. I remember back in 1996 when a gunman entered a school in Dunblane in Scotland and murdered 16 little children and a teacher. And I recall the head teacher being interviewed afterwards and saying, ‘evil visited us yesterday and we don’t know why...’ – such a simple but eloquent statement: the sense of a malign presence with its own motivation and its sheer irrationality: ‘evil visited... and we don’t know why...’

So consider evil as a spiritual and transcendent power that can erupt at any time, that can infiltrate the minds of people and use their agency to destroy what God would create and build – this is part of the Christian understanding of reality. And in a sense we should not be that surprised at what happened last Monday – shocked and heartbroken, but not surprised. And as Christians we possess something that the secular world lacks – a language with which to speak of such things, an inadequate and simplistic and metaphorical language, yes, but a language nevertheless. And with that language there goes a narrative that we tell in order to get some sort of purchase on this reality. It’s a narrative about a world created by God in love and blessed as good but that has become subject to destructive powers and forces that resist God. And over the Easter period that narrative took us to the place where God’s initiative to defeat those powers reached its decisive moment on a cross on a hill outside Jerusalem. There evil suffered a decisive defeat. And Thursday of last week was Ascension Day, when we celebrate Christ’s power and authority over every malign power that would infect and destroy what God has created as good. That does not put an end to the conflict. That does not bring the kingdom of heaven to earth here and now. The struggle still goes on. But the good news proclaimed by Christ’s ascension, coming after his death and resurrection, is that he is Lord of all, and while individual battles may still be lost and evil may continue to erupt and to bewilder us, the war is won.

And lastly, along with a language about evil and a narrative, we have a strategy for resisting it and defying it. We have the discipline of militant prayer by which we engage with evil and curtail its power; and we have the militant practice of worship in which we proclaim Christ as Lord, celebrating that Lordship in defiance of every other power and authority; and we have the militant spirit of love with its counter-intuitive practices of cheek-turning and forgiveness and reconciliation. And I use that word ‘militant’ repeatedly and deliberately because these are the weapons we are given to wage war against evil.

‘Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.’ Primitive, superstitious mythology? Or a poetic but rich description of something real – a description which seems ever more apt after the sickening events last week in Manchester. As Christians we are summoned to respond as those whose faith is in the crucified, risen and ascended Christ. It is a response of defiance, expressed in these strategies of resistance: prayer, worship, and love. Against such, the prowling lion is stilled and its roar silenced. Amen.

O holy God, gracious and sovereign one,
ruler over all,
you are to be praised and worshipped;
you are to be honoured and adored.

We worship you, God of Jesus Christ,
crucified, risen and ascended and who we confess as Lord;
We worship you, God of Jesus Christ,
who is Lord over every power, visible and invisible,
who is Lord over every throne and dominion and authority
in heaven and on earth;
We worship you, God of Jesus Christ,
Lord of our lives.
We bow before your majesty and praise your holy name.

O God forgive our failures to allow you to reign in our lives.
Forgive our capitulation to the tempter,
forgive our collusion with the enemy who comes to steal life from us;
forgive our compromises with lesser lords that would lead us astray.

Hear us, ascended Lord, as we confess to you our sins and failures,
Saying...

Lord Jesus Christ, ascended and sovereign one, send upon us your Holy Spirit to
assure us of your grace and forgiveness;

Send into our hearts the Holy Spirit of resistance that we may prevail in
our struggle to follow and to obey you. We pray