

LENT PROGRAMME 2017 THE CHURCH AND THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

SESSION 1 The Discernment of Spirits

7 March 2017

What I will be doing in these weeks of Lent, not including Holy Week, is exploring the ways in which the Church responds to the 'signs of the times' in terms of discerning the difference between good and evil. A big part of the imagery and backdrop of the season of Lent is drawn from Our Lord's struggle with Satan for forty days in the desert, subjected to real temptations to which he did not succumb. In this programme I will argue that in the Church we have become sanitised to the presence of the Evil One, abandoning traditional Christian awareness of a personification of evil – so I was tempted to call this whole series talks *Satan Today*. This demands a sense of moral seriousness which is appropriate to Lent, although we will end on a note of Christian hope stemming from the Paschal victory, from Easter.

Joy and Hope

But I actually want to begin this evening not with 'Old red socks', as he has sometimes been called, but with one of the most important Catholic teaching documents of the last century. The final 'constitution' from the Second Vatican Council, ratified when it ended in December 1965 – what's called *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. Almost always this is referred to by its Latin title, that is the opening words of the Latin text – *Gaudium et Spes*, 'Joy and Hope.' I will read the opening paragraphs

The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community of people united in Christ and guided by the holy Spirit in their pilgrimage towards the Father's kingdom, bearers of a message of salvation for all of humanity. That is why they cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history.

Now that the Second Vatican council has studied the mystery of the church more deeply, it addresses not only the daughters and sons of the church and all who call upon the name of Christ, but the whole of humanity as well, and it wishes to set down how it understands the presence and function of the church in the world of today. The world which the council has in mind is the world of women and men, the entire human family seen in its total environment. It is the world as the theatre of human history, bearing the marks of its travail, its triumphs and failures. It is the world which Christians believe has been created and is sustained by the love of its maker, has fallen into the slavery of sin but has been freed by Christ, who was crucified and rose again in order to break the stranglehold of the evil one, so that it might be fashioned anew according to God's design and brought to fulfilment

Note the phrase 'the stranglehold of the evil one'....

Commentators on the importance of Vatican II make it clear that this document was of abiding significance not so much because of the detail of what is in it, although that's important (it contains very important material on conscience, modern warfare and marriage, for example), but because of the tone and overall outlook. No longer is the Roman Catholic Church looking at the world from inside a besieged castle, under threat from the rest of the world. In line with the approach of other Council documents and the outlook of St John XXIII and Blessed Paul VI, the Church is now in *dialogue* with the contemporary world, including other Christians, members of other faiths and people without religious faith. All three categories, up until this point, were members of the human race whom the Church tended to see as beyond redemption. At the same time it is not an easy going, 'liberal' document. Later on there is a rounded condemnation of moral evils in the world

'all offences against life itself, such as murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia and wilful suicide; all violations of the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, physical and mental torture, undue psychological pressures; all offences against human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children, degrading working condition where men and women are treated as mere tools of profit rather than free and responsible persons: all these and the like are criminal: they poison civilisation; and they debase the perpetrators more than the victims and militate against the honour of the creator.' (27)

A big part, therefore, of *Gaudium et Spes* is about evil in the world - and the evil one. I know want to look a bit at what our Church teaches about him....

Know your Satan....what happens at a baptism

Some of you will have heard of Monsignor Ronald Knox, Catholic writer, university chaplain and translator of the Bible in the last century. It is said of him that, back in the 1950s, he reacted with some weariness to the introduction of responses in English (and some prayers in English) into the rite of Infant Baptism. He is alleged to have said 'the baby doesn't understand English, and the devil understands Latin.' In the old baptism rite 'Old red socks' figured quite highly I think, but Satan is still a significant player in the current rite (about forty years ago in the Church of England efforts were made to remove him, much to the annoyance of the best Anglican theologians of the time: I don't know what their current rite says).

As the baby is anointed in the breast with the Oil of Catechumens, before baptism, the priest or deacon says '**Almighty and every-living God, you sent your only Son into the world to cast out the power of Satan, spirit of evil....we pray for this child: set him free from original sin**' although there is an alternative prayer in which he is not mentioned. Christian teaching about original sin and the rebirth we have in baptism draws on the account of the Fall in the book of Genesis: in baptism we ask God to free the child from the propensity to sin throughout his or her life. Given that the child will face the power of evil and the dangers of temptation throughout life, I think it is helpful for evil to be personalised in this way.

And then after the font is blessed the parents and godparents are asked this question, among others.

Either

Do you reject Satan? And all his works? And all his empty promises?

Or

Do you reject sin,,,,? Do you reject the glamour of evil.....? Do you reject Satan, father of sin and prince of darkness?

I think both these forms of questions reiterate Catholic belief in a personal devil, and you can't get round this.

This is reiterated in the words of the *Catechism* 394-395:

[After talking of the fallen angels] **Scripture witnesses to the disastrous influence of the one Jesus calls 'a murderer from the beginning' who would even try to divert Jesus from the mission received from his Father. 'The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil' (1 Jn 3:8) In its consequences the gravest of these works was the mendacious seduction that led man to disobey God.**

The power of Satan is, nonetheless, not infinite. He is only a creature, powerful from the fact that he is pure spirit, but still a creature. He cannot prevent the building up of God's reign. For although Satan may act in the world out of hatred for God and his kingdom in Christ Jesus, and although his action may cause grave injuries - of a spiritual nature and, indirectly, even of a physical nature - to each man and to society, the action is permitted by divine providence which with strength and gentleness guides human and cosmic history.

It is clear then that for the Catholic Christian belief in a personal devil, in Satan, is not up for grabs. Moreover we are shown in this passage how he damages not just individual human beings but society. It is interesting at the moment in the world that people are thinking a lot about *truth* - an alien phrase, 'post-truth', seems to have arisen. This recalls an ancient title of Satan - *Father of Lies*. And perhaps the worst untruth of all is that he doesn't exist. Some of you may know CS Lewis' great classic *The Screwtape Letters*, written during the Second World War. In his preface to the book Lewis writes '**There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them.**' (p.9) I think his words remain true.

We're now going to hear some music from Elgar's musical setting of Blessed John Henry Newman's great poem *The Dream of Gerontius*

(Pause for musical interlude; Demons' chorus from Elgar, The Dream of Gerontius)

What is significant in Newman's rich and imaginative vision are really two things. First of all the demons' contempt for the human race (you see this in Lewis as well); and secondly their belief in the **'mind, bold and independent, the purpose free.'** So often evil in our society can be identified with excessive individualism and a warped idea of freedom and moral autonomy. Newman has hit the nail on the head.

There is one more thing I want to mention before looking at ways which we can discern the presence of evil - and that is, that when it comes to members of the human race, evil in a way shouldn't be used as an adjective; better for it to be treated as a noun (so I am not talking about 'the Evil one'). This is because popular culture likes to 'demonise' people by calling them evil, usually suggesting that they won't change and can't ever be redeemed ('throw away the key'). That is contrary to Christian teaching. Foolish misguided men and women can be seduced by evil - but that doesn't make them evil. In some of the specific things we will consider this Lent it's essential to keep this distinction in mind.

Discernment - the desert fathers

We all know, from last Sunday's gospel, how Lent is modelled on the period of forty days and forty nights which we're told Jesus spent in the desert at the very beginning of his adult ministry. This didn't just happen: we know from the Old Testament, and indeed from other religious traditions, that the desert, because of its barrenness and bleakness, is often a place where the people encounter the true God. Unnecessary things are stripped away; the faith encountered is simple and straightforward. At the same time the desert is a place of danger and foreboding - death from thirst and starvation, and wild beasts. The picture in the Bible is a rich one, deserving of a lot of treatment, but I want to move now to how in the earliest centuries of Christianity the desert becomes a place of discernment, above all in relation to the struggle with evil, with Satan.

What we are talking about is a pronounced religious movement in Egypt from about the second century which really took off in the years after persecution against the Church ended at the beginning of the fourth century. Many felt that the faith had now become too easy: the desert was a good place to carry out the battle against evil. This whole movement really becomes the basis for what we see as the monastic and religious life. Of course it shouldn't be seen as running away from the world: the hermits and monks rapidly became spiritual advisors to those still living in the world. Those who chose this way of life sought purity of heart, and freedom from disturbance - but all in the context of conflict and struggle, modelled on the temptations of the Lord in the desert about which we heard in Sunday's gospel. If you read about St Antony of Egypt and the rest of them - and in the writings of theologians like Evagrius and John Cassian this is a constant theme. There is a great deal which can be said about this tradition and a lot has been written by people who are real experts. But in terms of how this Lent we want to discern the signs of the times, and discern where evil and good are to be found, I think there are some features in the desert tradition which are particularly important:

- Conflict and struggle in themselves. The Christian's spiritual life can never be an easy or a cosy place. Moreover evil is often insidious - in our own hearts and in our communities. Moreover people can be taken in by lies and deception because that is what evil does. Satan is known as the Father of lies for a reason.
- At all levels the desert tradition entails a rejection. So the scholar Peter Brown calls this movement **a long drawn out ritual of dissociation - of becoming the total stranger...society was regarded as a shipwreck from which each single individual man had to swim for his life** (quoted in Leech *True God*) and Thomas Merton: **'these were men who believed that to let oneself drift along, passively accepting the tenets and values of what they knew as society, was purely and simply a disaster.'** In differing ways this counter-culture is true for all forms of the religious life. Of course we are not all called to the religious life - but we all need to keep a distance from the false values around us if our spiritual lives are to be genuine.
- The desert tradition exacted spiritual disciplines: and those seeking God sought discernment, what's called in Greek *diakrisis*, 'a right judgment in all things.' This means a certain amount of wrestling and struggle, but also silence and stillness in the presence of God, and above all humility. This discernment in the spiritual life is of course not simply 'spiritual' - people who flocked to listen to characters like Antony or St Simeon Stylites were seeking guidance about the whole of their lives. In our efforts to discern spirits in the world, the most important thing to get right is the need to see the whole process as spiritual. Everything in the world, if we see properly, is spiritual and religious.

All the moral issues in which we try to discern the difference between right and wrong are essentially theological: there is nothing which is not theological in God' world.

I have tried this evening to sketch out some ways in which we can see the 'signs of the times' in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council - above all by recognising Satan, and by not shying away, especially in Lent, from struggle with him as we seek discernment.

Thank you for coming.