

LENT COURSE SESSION 5 Fr Ashley Beck

THE CHURCH AND THE PASCHAL VICTORY 4 April 2017

Introduction - Satan in Shirley

Much of this series of talks has focused on the presence of evil - the Evil One, Satan - which we can discern in the world, following from the experience of Jesus in the desert where Satan is his companion. It is sobering when events unfold which confirm this. In our second session I identified as one of the clearest examples the increase in animosity towards foreigners - both nationals of other EU states (arising from the EU referendum campaign and result) and asylum seekers and refugees - in recent years. To see the 'smoke of Satan' here on our doorstep is still horrifying in the attack on Reker Ahmed in Shirley, a few miles from here, on Friday evening. It is completely irrational but it feels somehow worse when it is near your own community, in our neighbouring parish of West Wickham. While the facts are only slowly emerging what is particularly horrifying is that the attack appeared to involve a rather large group of people, and that other onlookers may have done little to help the victims of the attack. If it were in our parish I would want to go to the scene for public prayers from the Catholic community, asking for God's deliverance from evil. It does seem to have shocked people in the area. It is astonishing that the Daily Mail should express shock at the attack, having done so much over the years to create the atmosphere in which evil of this kind can flourish. While the primary victim was the young man, a Muslim, we should also see what happened as an attack on the Catholic Church and the Christian minority in this country because of the ways in which we have tried to support asylum seekers and refugees.

We ought to see the attack in the context of the Church's liturgy. I said at Mass this morning (and some of you were there) that people often do feel that the Evil One is particularly active at times of the year which are special or sacred for Christians; it is a bit like the ominous phrase from John 13:27, which we will hear at Mass in a week's time, when we are told that after Judas Iscariot takes the piece of bread from Our Lord 'Satan entered him.' This was followed up a few lines later by the phrase 'night had fallen.' Two sets of siblings and a girl who is only 17 were among those who have been charged; it all rather chilling, but in a way it does fit in with the paradoxical character of this time of year. Hostility towards refugees, shown in such acts of violence (and there were similar reports earlier today from Calais) is a very real and dramatic sign of evil in the world, of Satan.

The Harrowing of Hell

You may remember last week, when I was talking about the Church's reaction to torture by the State in Chile under the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet, that I referred to the British nurse Sheila Cassidy who was herself detained and tortured, in spite of being a British subject. After her release she wrote in 1977 a book about her experiences, *Audacity to Believe*. But probably her best known book is a meditation for this time of the year, *Good Friday People*, written in 1991 which draws not only on events in Chile but also on her experience as medical director of a hospice for the dying in Plymouth. What she does in the

book is relate the sufferings of people known to her with those of Jesus on his path to the Cross.

Some of you may come to church on Holy Saturday morning at 10 - it's very different because we don't have a Mass (not allowed to) and we bless Easter food. We have the Office of Readings and Morning Prayer from the Divine Office. We always hear a very striking non-Biblical reading from an ancient homily for Holy Saturday which imagines a particular scene: Jesus after his crucifixion and death going to the Jewish Underworld, known as Sheol, and engaging in dialogue with Adam. 'Arise, sleeper! I have not made you to be a prisoner in the underworld. Arise from the dead, I am the life of the dead.'

In the early Church there a lot of writings and sermons speculating about this sort of thing, and Dr Cassidy in a chapter towards the end of her book entitled 'The Harrowing of Hell' looks at a number of these writings. The Underworld, in these writings and traditions, is seen as a big internment camp or prison - she relates this to the experience of modern day prisoners or hostages such as the German pastor and opponent of the Nazis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Northern Irish school teacher kidnapped in Lebanon in the 80s, Brian Keenan.

Anyway Jesus in all these traditions is depicted, alongside his resurrection, as breaking down the gates of the Underworld and releasing those imprisoned - Adam and Eve, the prophets of the Old Testament and so on. This conquest of the Underworld by Jesus, described in very dramatic terms, is seen as foreshadowing the situations of oppression in the world which Cassidy cites. And oppression does end: looking back at the times in which she lived, it did end, eventually, in Chile, Soviet Russia (whatever the problems now) and El Salvador.

For all the evil we have looked at in these last few weeks, including the terrible events a few miles away last Friday, at the heart of what we are about at this time of year is not simply the sufferings of the Son of God (as if that were not enough) but his triumph. A great danger in Lent, when we are rightly conscious of our own sins and of sinfulness and evil in the world, is the sin of despair - but the liturgy of the Church offers us a way of avoiding this.

Living through Holy Week and Easter - the narrative of triumph

For in our worship at this time of year we hold two things together in tension, two things in paradox: indeed the reforms to the Holy Week services which started a long time ago, in the early 1950s under Pope Pius XII (and some of you may remember this) capture this tension rather better than was the case before things began to change. As we reflect every year the way we worship in Holy Week is rather different from the rest of the year in lots of ways - we try to enter into Our Lord's experiences in a more dramatic and intimate way; and now, much more than in the past, we hold the two ideas of suffering and triumph together in creative tension.

On the one hand, in Lent and in particular in its last week's our worship reflects austerity as we focus on the sufferings of Our Lord: the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, his betrayal and arrest, his being whipped and crowned with thorns, the way of the Cross and so on.

Throughout Christian history the cruelty and pain of these things, inflicted on an innocent person - in the tradition of innocent figures victimised in the Old Testament, as we hear at weekday Mass at the moment - have preoccupied poets, musicians and artists. The invention of the devotion of Stations of the Cross by the medieval Franciscans - who

also promoted devotion to the physical wounds and sufferings of Jesus - has had an enormous influence on Christian spirituality. The austerity is marked by purple vestments, the absence of organ music and flowers and, in the last two weeks of Lent, the veiling of crosses and images, something which makes us use our imagination, which takes away our props. Much of the music for this time of year, among the most awesome religious music ever written, captures well our sense of mourning and desolation at the sufferings of our Lord and God. Some of you may remember the evening service of Tenebrae, only rarely enacted now, which (from all accounts, as I am never experienced it) fitted this mood, taking place in almost complete darkness apart from a triangle with candles on it gradually extinguished during the service. A feature of the service is the use of the Lamentations from the book of Jeremiah: I played the setting of this by Thomas Tallis before we started this evening. The passages from Jeremiah are a reflection of the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the Temple before the exile to Babylon - the Church applies this sense of desolation to distress and mourning at the sufferings and death of Jesus. In these devotions we are asked not to hurry on: so in Stations we don't anticipate Easter. We normally end with the burial of Jesus. We are meant to wait.

This element of sadness and mourning is important and should not be lost. The sufferings and death of Jesus were real, and he is united in his sufferings to others who have suffered throughout history. The Holy Week worship prior to the reforms which began in the 50s was dominated by this sense of gloom. But it is not all: there is another feature which we are expected to hold in balance. For Jesus in his sufferings triumphs: the triumph and victory is not simply Easter Day, it is the whole process. For we believe that Jesus by his death on the Cross redeemed humanity, not simply by rising from the dead on Easter day. This element of triumph and victory is captured better now in the reformed Holy Week rites. The most striking sign of this is colour: on Palm Sunday the priest now wears red rather than purple, and on Good Friday red instead of black. Red is primarily the colour of blood, of the blood of Jesus. But is also a royal colour, the colour of victory. While not minimizing Our Lord's sufferings a big part of our tradition sees the way of the Cross as a victory procession as well as an experience reflecting physical pain and cruelty. The entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday reflects this too: he is riding on a donkey (reflecting Old Testament prophecy) but it is also portrayed in the gospels as a joyful and triumphant event, vividly symbolised by the waving of palm and olive branches and leaves. Of course on Palm Sunday the mood changes quickly since we always hear a Passion narrative - but the juxtaposition is the whole point.

Another thing which speaks to us of something very different from helplessness and suffering is the Passion narrative we always hear on Good Friday. On Palm Sunday the Passion account is from one of the first three gospels - but on Good Friday afternoon it is always from the gospel of John, and here, on the most awesome day of the year, the tone is different. There is austerity, yes, symbolised by the clergy lying flat on their faces at the beginning of

the service at 3pm; but in the Passion of John the 'tone' is different from what we experience when we go to Stations of the Cross. In John Jesus is in control of what is happening - it is everyone else, including Pontius Pilate, who doesn't really know what is going on. So the guards who come to arrest Jesus in the garden fall to the ground; Jesus concedes nothing at all to the priests or to Pilate. On the cross Jesus is thirsty but there is no cry of anguish; simply the words 'it is accomplished.'

Conclusion

So the final message of these talks is really very simple. We can and must do our best to discern the presence of evil in the world, and of the Evil One. Satan's greatest achievement is to persuade us that he does not exist. We also need to work hard at this discernment and not be afraid to denounce evil and pray for deliverance from it. In the aftermath of the attack a few weeks ago on Westminster Bridge there was an important public demonstration of solidarity with the victims, hundreds of people joining arms over the bridge. Is something like that happening in Shirley? Where are the Christians? (I am not making a point; I have no idea). Would we do something like that if the attack had happened in Village Way? There does seem to have been horror about what has happened and even graffiti going up saying 'Refugees Welcome.'

But above all we need to remember that Jesus, Our Lord and God, has triumphed over evil, over Satan. That is what we will be about on Sunday and next week, Holy Week. Hatred and violence never have the last word. The last word is this ancient hymn for this week and next known as Vexilla Regis; there is a lot of triumph here, and after I have read the words I will play you the very triumphant setting by Franz Liszt:

Abroad the regal banners fly,
now shines the cross's mystery;
upon it Life did death endure,
and yet by death did life procure.
Who, wounded with a direful spear,
did, purposely to wash us clear from stain of sin,
pour out a flood of precious water mixed with blood.

That which the Prophet-King of old
hath in mysterious verse foretold,
is now accomplished, whilst we see
God ruling nations from a tree.

O lovely and refulgent tree,
adorned with purpled majesty;
culled from a worthy stock, to bear
those limbs which sanctified were.
Blest tree, whose happy branches bore
the wealth that did the world restore;
the beam that did that body weigh
which raised up hell's expected prey.

Hail, cross, of hopes the most sublime!
Now in this mournful passion time,
improve religious souls in grace,
the sins of criminals efface.

Blest Trinity, salvation's spring,
may every soul thy praises sing;
to those thou grantest conquest
by the holy Cross, rewards apply.