

Sunday 7th June 2015

Sermon for Trinity 1

©Susan Peatfield, Reader

There was an advert a few years ago, for I think, low-fat cream cheese. A devil in red with horns cloven-feet etc (possibly played by Dawn French?) encourages the young woman dieter to "Eat! You know you want to!" An angel, all golden and shiny just smiles - "You can now!" The message is that with this product you are committing no "sins". The devil snorts with anger and disappears in a cloud of red smoke. Or something like that....

It is perhaps because of adverts like this that the writers of services in the Church of England have proposed changes to the wording of the baptism service. Whereas since the time of the *Book Of Common Prayer* Godparents have been asked to reject the devil and all his works, it is now suggested that whereas in the past the devil had a real power in the human imagination he is now seen as bit more of a pantomime character or Dawn French (if it was she). Inevitably in certain circles this been criticised as more evidence of the church "dumbing down". More seriously, church leaders in parts of Africa and Asia have seen these proposed changes as a white Western reading of the status of the devil and one very far from the experience of many in more traditional cultures. Be that as it may the devil seems on his way out in the Church of England.

This is very far from the case in our Gospel reading today. The context of the verses from Mark we have just heard is that Jesus is at the beginning of his earthly ministry and he has gained a lot of attention very quickly. Vast crowds have gathered and followed him to hear him teach and, mainly, to bring to him all in need of help. Earlier in the chapter we hear of these wonderful acts of transforming healing, including crucially for what follows the casting out of demons. Later writers and doctors speculate on what demon-possession might have actually been - epilepsy, psychosis of various kinds — but to those suffering at the time they genuinely believed that they were possessed by an evil spirit and could find no peace of mind or comfort. Jesus has cast out demons/Jesus has set at rest troubled minds — we can read this as we will.

This activity has drawn unwelcome attention from the authorities too though. In what power or name is he doing this? Is he perhaps Beelzebul or Beelzebub as the Authorised Version has it? (Beelzebub, the name of a senior devil means "Lord of the Flies" — interesting modern interpretation by William Golding on what devilry might mean.) Jesus dismisses this as nonsense. How can the devil overpower the devil? What Jesus is offering is freedom from the power of sin, the tyranny of evil. He is offering God's love, forgiveness and renewal to all who accept the offer.

The power of sin and the tyranny of evil. The words that the new baptism proposal suggests instead of rejecting the devil are these: Do you reject evil and all its many forms and all its empty promises?

These are words that might very helpfully have been asked of Adam and Eve. The story we heard read from the Old Testament today is of the Fall. The fall of not just Adam and Eve but of all humanity from the state of innocence, of walking with God in the cool of the evening, of the time before sin and suffering and death. I do not know where you file this story in your mind, as fact, truth, mystery or myth, but it is the core picture we have of separation from God, of separation chosen, the first and fatal exercise of freewill.

We might like to dismiss this story as we do the devil. We might like to read many interpretations in to it, including why the serpent, who in the account we have is and remains a serpent albeit a crafty one, has been identified throughout Christian thought with the devil. What happens in the Garden of Eden is the origin of sin, of original sin. Why we baptise infants in the first place.

And yes we might like to feel we have outgrown this sin and evil stuff too, but for the fact that whenever we look at the news on our television screens, whenever we read the news, and, whenever we are brave enough to look into ourselves we do see what we might for shorthand call "the power of sin and the tyranny of evil", and yes, in all its forms and all its empty promises.

For evil is a big word but it lives in small acts of separation. Whenever I act as though only my needs are important, only my wants satisfied, then the separation is reinforced. I may then proceed (if that is the right word) to knowing that my actions hurt others but being able to justify to myself continuing in them. Finally I may be so separated that causing pain to others has its own allure. Not nice for a sunny Sunday in Trinity. Not as picture book as Adam and Eve in their fig-leaves. Yes, we would like to have outgrown all this. We would like I think sometimes to shrug off the notions of evil and sin as easily as we can our pantomime devil. Only we can't. We can't because however much we employ the language of psychology, of neuroscience, of chemistry, the results of bad human choices — evil – sin - name it how we will — do not go away.....

So I think that there is something desperately wrong with that advert. Something that gets in the way of many people being freed from the sadness, damage, rubbish in our lives and it's not the picture of the devil as a comedienne, it's the idea that sin is as insubstantial as a few extra calories and that the power of goodness is a smily blonde with tinsel halo.

Real sin, separation, damage: The things too deep for words, too hard to think about, too shaming or just too sad are the things Jesus came to talk about, live and die for us. In him is forgiveness of sins. Things only we know, things only he can heal. In him there is no separation. Whatever we take or reject from the language of the past, the living truth of lives transformed is as true today as in Galilee yesterday. What is required is the answer to another question posed at our baptisms and one which will never change though all else pass away. The simple question which gives the answer to all we shall ever need: Do you turn to Christ? I turn to Christ.

Amen