

GOSPEL SEEDS

MARCH, 2006

Biblical reflections to encourage us in the work of evangelisation

OVERCOMING THE MYSTERY OF EVIL

Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan. You are an obstacle in my path because you are thinking not as God thinks but as human beings do.' Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself, take up his cross and follow me. (Mt 16:23-24)

The context here is that Peter has just declared his faith in Jesus as 'the Christ and the Son of the living God'. Jesus affirms that he can only do this by revelation from God. Jesus then goes on to prophesy his passion. Peter reacts strongly against this- 'it must not happen to you'. Then in the first statement here Jesus addresses Peter as Satan but then identifies Peter's protest as being a human – not Divine – way of thinking. (This is in complete contrast to Peter's previous way of thinking which also was not of human origin but identified as coming from God.) Jesus clearly detects opposition and senses evil at work here. Is this evil just human - and part of human limitation, ignorance, selfishness, or even malevolence - or is it from another source, a supernatural one? Is it a combination of both? Is Jesus, or Matthew as the author, just speaking figuratively of Satan? This is unlikely as Satan is presented as a real force with intelligence, power and guile elsewhere in this Gospel. Such characterisation runs through the New Testament. It would seem that Jesus is here identifying Satan as the root source of this particular temptation that seeks to dissuade Jesus from doing what he sees as God's will in much the same way as Satan is presented as tempting Jesus in the desert at the beginning of this public ministry (Mt 4: 1 – 11). Evil and opposition to God may have both human and supernatural components. Evil then is real – if mysterious (2 Thes 2:7; Rev 17:7). Peter thinks it is a scandal that Jesus should suffer and die; Jesus identifies Peter's attitude as a scandal (the word here translated as obstacle) since this is ignorant of, obstructs and disobeys God's will. Here, with Peter, it seems that as grace abounds, revealing who Jesus is, so opposition to God also makes an impact. Let us try to explore a little the nature of evil and how it can be overcome.

An Anatomy of the Nature of Evil – and its Growth and Results

Moral and spiritual evil, according to the Judaeo-Christian tradition, have their origins when a being seeks its own fulfilment – rather than seek it in God and look to God for it, accepting it from God, the source of goodness from whom all blessings flow. It decides to make itself the measure of things – not God. It thus thinks it has knowledge of and the ability to judge and discern good in contrast to evil. Declaring its independence, it then decides what is true and good and what is false and bad. (In this it deceives and lies.) It becomes focussed on itself (proud), full of itself (boastful), and seeks only after its own benefit (is selfish) and sees itself as the measure of all (is deluded and boastful). Since it has been made for God and not itself, this self-orientation does not bring it fulfilment, joy or peace. In the resulting dis-ease (a restlessness leading to greed and lust), and loss of fulfilment from not being God-centred and giving itself away, it is jealous, envious and insecure; it hates and falsely accuses, is controlling and domineering, and seeks to destroy. It thus produces rivalries, distrust, broken relationships and disunity.

In humans it starts with temptations but the more we yield the more it grows. Temptation exploits and becomes desire. Desire conceives and gives birth to sin which, fully grown, gives birth to death, as James puts it (1:13-15). This can set fire to the whole of creation,

enslaving it, poisoning all societies and bringing in a culture of death. In this life we each struggle between good and evil, between doing what is right and doing what is wrong. We feel the attraction and the power of both. The more fully people give themselves over to evil, excluding goodness, truth and love – and God, the more fully they will experience the grip and power of evil. Turning away from love of God and love of others, they become imprisoned in themselves. Seeking their own advantage their energy and yearning is turned in on itself yet it fails to satisfy and bring peace. This realisation – if it does not lead to repentance – leads to resentment of self as well as others, generating even more self-loathing, disgust, rage and, when it is turned towards others, hateful and murderous domination. In attempting to save or satisfy themselves, they lose and destroy themselves (cf Mk 8:35). In the world of evil spirits, who were good and powerful angels who freely turned against God, we see the full horror of this choice and the end of this path. While they still can, they fight God and his goodness. Satan is at their head and it is Satan that Christ combated in the passage we started with.

An old heart giving death and a new heart giving life

Where does this mystery of evil start for us as humans? Jesus makes plain that it starts in our hearts. “For it is from within, from the heart, that evil intentions emerge: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, malice, deceit, indecency, envy, slander, pride, folly (Mk 7:21).” As Jeremiah exclaimed: “The heart is more devious than any other thing, and depraved; who can pierce its secrets? (Jer 17:9)”. Though we should not lose sight of the fact that we are created by a good God, with Paul we groan and cry out “What a wretched person I am! Who will rescue me from this body doomed to death? God – thanks be to him – through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom 7:24)”. Being born again, God gives us a new heart.

This is foretold by the prophets. Jeremiah predicted a new covenant in which God will plant his law within us, writing it on our hearts. As a result people will encounter God in a fresh and direct way, knowing God and his ways (Jer 31:31-34). Ezekiel speaks in a similar vein. “I shall give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I shall remove the heart of stone from your bodies and give you a heart of flesh instead. I shall put my spirit in you and make you keep my laws and respect and practise my judgements (Ezek 36:26-27)”. Jesus has this heart and lives in perfect obedience to his Father with this heart, tempted but not overcome by evil. His life is the model for overcoming evil. He dies and his heart is pierced so that his heart, raised up, can be given to us (cf Jn 7:37-39). His Pascal Mystery provides the means to overcome evil.

Living obediently in Christ – to share his victory over evil!

At the heart of evil is (deliberate) disobedience to God. Creatures want to be free of God and their creaturely status and end up enslaved by sin and death. Jesus is supremely obedient and free. As Son of God he sought only to do the Father’s will. The fullness of the Spirit unites Father and Son in love. He is thus the perfect man too – but this was costly. Jesus did not use force or coercion to overcome evil but obedience – being a humble servant unto death. “Not by might nor by power but by my Spirit – says the Lord (Zech 4:4).” Jesus’ obedience is accomplished through the powerful presence of the Spirit. Freedom consists, through the grace of God, in knowing and being able to do the will of God. Then we will no longer produce the evil fruit of the flesh but the good fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control (See Gal 5: 13-26). Thus is the mystery of evil mysteriously overcome and Christ powerfully witnessed to!

[Gospel Seeds: 06/03] *To make contact: Andrew Brookes, 119 B Arbroath Rd, Dundee, DD4 6HS, Tel: 01382 462463. Email: andrewbrookes@straitmail.co.uk*
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