

THE ADVERSARY & THE ADVOCATE

A revised version of a sermon given at Streat Church, 15 May 2022.

Last Sunday David spoke about the evil in the world and memorably showed us eight pictures of innocent looking young boys, maybe three or four years old, painted by Annie Kevans. They looked normal enough ... until we were told who they were: Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Pol Pot, Idi Amin, Saddam Hussein, and three other monsters of the 20th century.

These eight boys grew up to do appalling acts of evil, and their lives confront us with some basic questions: Why did they do what they did? Where does evil come from? Is evil the work of the Devil (or Satan), or does it come from within us?

Recently, Helen was at a meeting discussing what evil is. Had I been there, I would have said evil is any act or intention that is opposed to God's will. Evil is meaningless for those who don't have a standard of goodness; for Christians God is that standard, and evil is anything opposed to it – not just terrible things like the holocaust and ethnic cleansing, but the small things too that show we're not entirely on God's wavelength. But we're still left with the question: What is the source of evil? Many believe it is Satan, the Devil, pointing to passages in the Bible that say as much, *e.g.*, the temptations of Jesus (*Matthew 4.1*) Interestingly, the Devil doesn't figure much in the OT, but when he does he is usually pictured as Satan, the Adversary, or Accuser, a member of the heavenly court, the servant of God who brought sinners before God for judgement. He tests faith and moral worth, as in the story of Job.

The story opens with a meeting of the court of heaven; God asks Satan what he's been up to, and asks him if he has considered his servant Job, exemplary as an example of faith and righteousness. Satan replies that Job is only so faithful because God has bestowed on him enormous riches; take them away and he will curse you, he says. So God gives Satan leave to inflict misfortune on Job, and that is what he does: all Job's flocks and cattle are destroyed, his children and their

families are killed, and Job himself is inflicted with running sores from his head to his feet. What happens to him is simply appalling.

It's important to be clear that the Book of Job is a work of fiction; the events described didn't actually happen. They set the scene for a philosophical poem (with a prose prologue and epilogue), an example of what is called 'theodicy', a writing designed to justify the ways of God to men, especially in respect to the existence of evil. It's also important to be clear that its picture of God is less than Christian. Inflicting appalling suffering inflicted on someone to test their faith is utterly incompatible with the God of love, of whom Jesus is the human face. For this reason alone, the story can't be true. It is also important to note that Satan acts with the consent of God; he is the Adversary who serves God; he is not represented as an independent agent; a source of evil independent of God.

Over time the idea of Satan as the Adversary became corrupted, and Satan came to be thought of as the source of evil. This belief is seen in the NT, sometimes pictured as Beelzebub, though it's not clear where he comes from. But the idea of Satan as the Adversary continues to run alongside this; it was in Jesus' mind at the Last Supper. In the course of a dispute among the disciples about who was the greatest, Jesus gave this warning: 'Simon, Simon take heed: Satan has been given leave to sift all of you like wheat ...' (*Luke 22.31*)

Sifting motives, sorting out the chaff from the grain, that's what the Adversary does. We all know, I imagine, what this feels like. When we're in a dilemma about what to do, especially if one option involves cutting a few corners, we are being sifted. When someone hurts us, or takes advantage of us, and we harbour thoughts of getting even, we're being sifted.

The idea of Satan as the Adversary is much more plausible than Satan as an independent source of evil. In some religions there are two or more gods, some good some evil; but this won't fit with Christianity where there is only one God, the sole source of creation. If God is the only God, Satan can't be a source of evil independent of God; if he is then God is not the only God. It's better to keep to the old idea of Satan

the Adversary, and it actually fits well with modern psychology (part of the truth into which the Holy Spirit has led us: *cf. John 14.26*). It fits also with our experience of temptation, the inner voice that says, 'Why don't you do it this way; it won't really do any harm.'

This was the essence of Jesus' temptations; they show how the Adversary works, how evil takes hold (*Matthew 4.1-11; Luke 4.1-13*) He knows what Jesus wants to do. 'You want to bring these people back to God?' the Devil whispers. 'I'm here to help you. Why don't you give them what they want; turn these stones into bread; feed them; they'll follow you gladly! Or, you could put on a good show. Everyone loves a good show: throw yourself down from the Temple and the angels will save you. That will show them for sure that God is with you! A bit too showy? I agree. What they really need is a strong leader. That's something I know about. Throw your lot in with me; I'll help them to see you're in charge!

Satan is not pictured as the source of evil, but as the source of temptation. What we do is actually up to us, as it was up to Jesus. Satan offered him a choice: 'If I were you, I'd do it this way ...' The Adversary works along the grain of who we are, tempting us to go a bit further, perverting the good things we want to do, or giving us permission to take the wrong route. We see his work in the overweening ambition of political and corporate leaders – Putin or Geoffrey Epstein come to mind; or in the perverted ideas of groups like Al Khaida and far right groups like Patriotic Alternative here in the UK. The Adversary works with our desire for revenge, to get even, as in the Vardy/Rooney libel action; he works with our fear and distrust of those who are different, as in the debate over immigration; he works in the way we project our bad side on to others; and he works by giving us permission to indulge our appetites. This last was illustrated in a famous series of paintings by William Hogarth in the seventeenth century called *The Rake's Progress*. They depict the moral corruption and ruin of a man who, corrupted by wealth, gives his life to the pursuit of sensual pleasures and vice. The paintings became the subject of an opera by Igor Stravinsky, in which the rake is given the name

Tom Rakewell, and a new character is introduced, Nick Shadow, Tom's alter ego, his darker side, the Adversary.

In contrast to Jesus, Tom is seduced by Nick Shadow's offer of help, and at first all seems to be going well with the life of pleasure. But what Nick has done is to release Tom's lower nature, and this is the cause of his eventual ruin. Evil comes from within us, as Jesus warned in a dispute over the Jewish food laws. Eating so-called 'unclean' food was forbidden because it defiled you. Jesus rejected the idea. What what you eat, he said, can't defile you. Nothing that goes into you defiles you because it does not enter your heart, but into the stomach. 'It is what comes out of a person that defiles him. From inside, from the human heart, come evil thoughts, acts of fornication, theft, murder, adultery, greed and malice; fraud indecency, envy, slander, arrogance and folly; all these evil things come from within, and they are what defile a person.' (*Mark 7.20-23*)

The Biblical scholar, Walter Wink, explained evil in these words: 'When we fail to bring a committed ego to the struggles for choice, and yield ourselves to compulsive gambling, or to overeating or drinking, or to sexual promiscuity, or to compliance with corporate directives we know to be unethical - then we place ourselves in the power of evil.' (*Unmasking the Powers, p.34*) Walter Wink sees Satan as an archetype, the real inner spirit of a person or society that idolatrously pursues their/its own enhancement as the highest good: "'Satan" is the actual power that congeals around collective idolatry, injustice, or inhumanity, a power that increases or decreases according to the degree of the collective refusal to choose higher values.' (*Naming the Powers, p. 105*) We saw that power congeal around the banks, precipitating the banking crisis in 2008; it congeals around the gunmen who kill school children in the USA; and we see it now congealing around Vladimir Putin and his advisors, and even around the Patriarch and bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church who have signally failed to condemn the war in Ukraine. It is appropriate to speak of this power in personal terms, as Jesus did, because that is what it feels like - indeed it is part of our self, just like Nick Shadow.

Evil comes from within us. It is an inescapable part of God's gift of personal and moral freedom: we can use this gift for good, or we can abuse it for evil. We have the capacity for good and we have the capacity for evil; we choose which capacity to use in any given situation. The eight boys whose pictures David showed us last week, chose to use their capacity for evil. The next day I happened to read an article in *The Tablet* (30 April 2022) called 'The Devil Inside', written by Gwen Adshead, a forensic psychiatrist and psychotherapist who works with criminals who have committed appalling crimes. She writes: 'As a therapist who works with people who have done terrible things ... I am often asked what I think about the existence of evil. My experience is that evil is potentially found in all of us. It is a state of mind that begins with turning away from all that is healthy and beautiful in our lives. ... I have met so many violent and abusive criminals who have found no way to serve others or to enjoy themselves; their capacity for growth and happiness had either never developed or it was stunted or corrupted.' Gwen Adshead says we must have compassion for such people, but at the same time, she says, they and us will only get better when we 'start to own our behaviour and take responsibility for who we are and the story of our life.'

Being clear about the source of evil is essential to effective action to counter it. If it comes from within us we can't blame it on the Devil, as though somehow it was nothing to do with us - an external force, like the wind, that simply overcame us. If the Adversary is within us, part of our human nature, then dealing with evil is part of our growth to human maturity. We have to learn to master the strong feelings that threaten to take us over, and direct them to serving the good. Our growth to maturity means we have to be clear about ourselves, especially about our feelings and our motivations. In our prayers we need to ask God to reveal us to ourselves.

Another step in our growth to maturity is the realisation that the path to Hell begins with small steps. Karl Stern, a German-Canadian neurologist and psychiatrist, and a Jewish convert to the Catholic Church, in his autobiography *Pillar of Fire* speaks of arriving in Bavaria as Nazism was beginning to take hold in the minds of Germans. He

noted as he walked home from the station, where his father had met him, that some of those of their acquaintance refused to greet them as they passed by. Donald Nicholl, in his book *Testing of Hearts*, comments: 'It is precisely with such little acts of cowardice and hostility that all the terrible events of our terrible world begin - the lying, the tortures and the killings.'

This is how the Adversary works: one small step at a time, and he does not give up - Luke says at the end of Jesus' temptations 'the devil departed, biding his time'. But this isn't the last word. The Good News is that Jesus promised to send the Advocate to defend us against the Adversary. At the Last Supper, he said: 'If you love me you will obey my commands; and I will ask the Father, and he will give you another to be your Advocate, who will be with you for ever - the Spirit of truth. ... Your Advocate will teach you everything ... and will call to mind all that I have told you.' (*John 14.15-17, 26*) The Advocate is the Holy Spirit, who works within us to counter the Adversary and to develop and strengthen our capacity for goodness and truth. The devil may bide his time, but the Spirit is an ever-present defender and source of strength. We all received the gift of the Spirit at our baptism - a gift we celebrate at Pentecost in a couple of week's time.

Donald Nicholl ends his reflection on Karl Stern's experience by pointing out that the path to Heaven also begins with small steps. He says: 'The work of reconciliation begins with an act of greeting. Simply to greet another person, to recognise that person, is to participate in the sacrament of peace.' Part of our prayer, day by day, is to ask God to strengthen his gift of the Spirit so that we can take these small steps to heaven, and so defend us against our Adversary. Being aware of ourselves, opening ourselves to God and letting the Spirit work within us, is part of our calling as Christians, and God promises that if we do, he will be with us as our Advocate: our strength and our guide.