



Sermon: - 18th February 2018

Wrestling with the devil

Psalm 25; Mark 1: 9 - 15

There's an old joke about a man finding the devil clutching the railings of a church, sobbing uncontrollably. Struck by this unexpected sight, the man said, "what's the matter?" The devil replied, "it's these Christians, they blame me for everything!"

Nowadays the concept of a real live devil is somewhat out of fashion. We have television programmes which make fun of it, such as one, called Reaper, about a boy whose parents sold his soul to the devil when he was a baby so that he now has to work for the devil recapturing souls which have escaped from hell!

The devil is a source of humour, the subject of films, books and television programmes which are far-fetched and unreal.

But I wonder if we are too quick to dismiss the idea of the devil. Perhaps not horns and a tail, pitchfork and cloven hooves, but as we observe the world around us, do we not see evil that is more than just the sum of our own human flaws, our pride and selfishness. The older I get, and the further I travel on my Christian journey, the more I see things in myself, in the church and on the national or global stage that are increasingly difficult to explain simply in terms of our own faults and failings. As we look around us do we not see the reality of the forces of evil in our world? Can we not see evidence of great and deep and dreadful darkness in our world? A darkness that is not simply the result of human wickedness but seems to have a deeper and darker spiritual source.

We cannot fail to have been shocked by the events in Florida earlier this week. Can we doubt the reality of evil in this world when the voice of the National Rifle Association is heard above the cries of murdered schoolchildren? There have been 18 school shootings since January 1st this year. Indeed, when we hear that there have been 300 school shootings since 2013, an average of one per week for the last 5 years, can we doubt the reality of evil. The American people are no worse than anyone else people, but a state of affairs exists there which allows these things to happen. *Isn't that the result of evil forces?*

There are things in history too, such as the Holocaust, possibly the most horrific example of man's inhumanity to man in the modern era, which seem to defy comprehension unless there are forces of evil that are bigger and stronger and more organized than our assorted human weaknesses could ever be.

You may have heard of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian. During World War II, Bonhoeffer played a key leadership role in the Confessing Church, opposing the anti-Semitic policies of Adolf Hitler. He was among those who called for wider church resistance to Hitler's treatment of the Jews. Part of the plot to kill Hitler, Bonhoeffer was hanged in April 1945, just three weeks before the liberation of Berlin. The Harvard Professor of Jewish studies, Jon Levenson asks whether Bonhoeffer would have been half as definite and courageous in his resistance to the Nazis if he had believed Hitler and his followers to be simply the victims of inner psychological traumas, mistaken, wrong, ordinarily sinful. Rather, he says, Bonhoeffer saw evil as having a face, and a name, and therefore being something that could be unmasked, denounced and resisted. For Bonhoeffer evil was an entity which could be named and wrestled with, and that evil was made manifest in Nazi Germany.

The gospel reading for today simply says that Jesus was tempted by Satan. The other Gospels go into much more detail about the nature of his temptation, and we heard those in the children's reading. Whether it is helpful to you to think of evil forces as being personified in an individual, the Devil, or to see them simply as dark and nebulous forces, nevertheless, what the gospel makes clear is that there is a force against good which exists in this world, a force which we might call the devil and the gospels make clear that Jesus wrestled with temptation, just as we do ourselves.

The apostle Paul speaks of being like a boxer who "pummels his own body" to bring it under control. As we begin Lent we might want to give something up; chocolate, or wine, or our favourite TV programme, or, as one friend of mine proposed, giving up feeling guilty for Lent! We engage in a discipline which is good for us physically, but also spiritually as we focus on things that matter more than satisfying bodily pleasures. But it's not easy – it takes strength to wrestle with our appetites and desires.

We may "wrestle" with the word of God and try to extract from this manuscript which is 2000 + years old, the word of God for us today. We try to make sense of ancient texts in a modern context, this very different context to the one in which they were written.

And we wrestle with the powers of evil... cosmic powers... In Ephesians Paul tells us that we are wrestling against dark powers...spiritual forces of evil, and in today's gospel we read of Jesus

tempted by Satan, which in other Gospels is portrayed as representing all the temptations that the world has to offer, all of which would deflect him from his true purpose. He is tempted to give in to his bodily appetites, to turn stones into bread.... He is tempted with wealth and riches; the devil offers him power over all the nations of the world. He is tempted to exercise power over the angels in heaven, to call on them to save him as he falls to earth as proof that he is indeed the son of God.

So if we accept that there is this power of evil, which we might call the Devil, a power which exists independently of our own selfish thoughts and desires, how is it manifest today? How do we recognise it? And then, how do we fight it?

There are three different aspects, I think, to what we might call wrestling with the devil.

We wrestle as individuals... when the temptations of the world threaten to overwhelm our Christian commitment.

When we are tempted to succumb to our bodily appetites when we know it is wrong, appetites which pull us away from God rather than bring us closer to him.

When we are tempted by greed to spend too much time and effort making money, or spend too much money and effort gaining possessions

When we are tempted to abuse our power or gain power that does not belong to us.

We may not personally have experienced these temptations, but we know enough about the world to know that many do. And we will have our own temptations with which we struggle. Temptations which may on occasion threaten to overwhelm us.

Wrestling with the devil.

We wrestle with the devil... as a church. When our missionary purpose to take God's gift of grace to those on our doorstep, our desire to build God's kingdom in this corner of the land, is thwarted by events seemingly outwith our control.

When infighting in our congregations threaten to alienate those on our doorstep who need us most.

When we allow selfishness to dominate our dealings with one another, rather than grace.

When our compulsion, our inner compulsion is to be divisive rather than unite against the common enemy.

Again, we may not have those problems here in Campsie Parish Church, but we know that there are congregations today where these things are all too real. As you know, my husband David is an Interim Minister. It is his job to go into situations where relationships within a congregation had broken down to such an extent that it is no longer possible to operate an effective ministry. He has to bring healing and enable reconciliation and peace in order that someone else can take the congregation forward.

Wrestling with the devil.

We wrestle with the devil... in the world. Being the prophetic voice, as individuals and as a church, which cries out against injustice, wherever it might be found.

Praying that God's will might be done, praying against the powers of evil at home or abroad.

Taking action where we can to redress the balance between good and evil.

Wrestling as Christian people against the principalities and powers of the world and standing up for the poor, the oppressed, the homeless, the downtrodden, the victims of prejudice, greed and war.

Write to our MPs, make our vote count, be unafraid to speak out against powers of evil, fighting for justice, fairness, righteousness wherever we see injustice, unfairness, wickedness.

The good news is that, despite what ever forces of evil maybe abroad in this world, we are made in the image of God, and that includes having an instinct for goodness and being able to tell the difference between good and evil. In our relationship with God and through his Spirit we have available to us more than enough wisdom, courage and strength to discern and resist whatever evil comes our way. Also, we do not usually have to face evil alone the way Jesus did. We are called into a community of Christian people together and as a community we can be much more capable of discerning and overcoming anything the powers of evil throw at us. We need not feel lonely in our battles, we need not feel overwhelmed by negativity, we are called into fellowship, with one another and with God, and together we can wrestle, and fight, and pray, that the forces of darkness would recognise that they are already defeated in the death and resurrection of our Saviour, Jesus Christ, whose triumphant spirit lives within each of us here.