

1st Sunday in Lent, March 26th 2023, St Mary's Maldon

I thought that everyone would find it cheery on the first Sunday of Lent to have a nice little chat about sin, evil, and the Devil. I trust you are all up for that. I don't want to start with a text from the Bible but with one from a French poet called Charles Péguy, who I love:

'The sinner is at the very heart of Christianity. Nobody is so competent in matters of Christianity. Nobody, except the saint.'

Now, I am expecting you to not understand the quotation, perhaps, until you have listened to the sermon.

You see, sin has actually almost vanished from the modern world. You never hear it mentioned on the radio. I've hardly even ever had conversations about it here. Nobody does anything wrong and nobody apologises. In politics, we are the good guys and the baddies are the other lot. Putin is the devil, Zelensky is a saint. Well, I actually more or less believe that. What about Rishi Sunak is the devil and Keir Starmer is a saint? Left is good, right is bad, right is good, left is bad. It doesn't work. All it does is remove from me my responsibility.

The only living sinner in the world of politics is John Major, who committed adultery, said he was deeply ashamed, and the angels in heaven rejoiced over that one sinner who repented. All the rest said, 'I didn't do it', or 'it was the other lot', or 'I'm sorry if you were offended', not, 'I am sorry that I did it'. 'I'm sorry if you were offended', you may notice, doesn't take responsibility.

Many church people, when asked about their Christian faith tell you that they try to lead a good life. That doesn't get to the heart of the matter. What I don't often hear is, 'Well actually I have made a complete balls up of my life, but in the midst of the mess, I am discovering that I am loved, forgiven and set free, sometimes this forgiveness comes to me from some unknown source, that is from God, when I am absolutely rock bottom and when I know that I simply don't deserve it.

Dare I say, from the evidence of the gospels, Jesus seems to have liked sinners more than he liked good people. Their parties were much more fun, and nobody is either excluded or disapproved of. Jesus once said to the Pharisees:

I tell you; 'the prostitutes go into the Kingdom of Heaven before you.'

Let's talk about the Devil. I don't want to get into an argument with anyone about this, but the Devil isn't as important in the Bible as some people think. He gets something like 3 mentions in the Old Testament, and the story of the serpent tempting Eve is not one of them. And the Devil Jesus meets in the wilderness really isn't that bad. He's not nearly as bad as Mr Putin. Actually, he's essential. And you probably noticed that it's the Spirit who leads Jesus to face him. As an aside, if you have never been tempted, the only explanation could possibly be is that you always give in to temptation..... in which case the Devil simply won't bother with you.

Does the Devil exist? All I want to say in answer to that is that I don't very often meet people who objectively believe in him, even if they think they do.

What if he was something inside Jesus, inside and between the disciples, inside and between Jesus' enemies; inside and between us. A negative and harmful voice.

As I read the gospel this week, I've noticed 2 things about Jesus' devil. Firstly, every time he speaks, he quotes the Bible. He's one of those Christians who thinks everything is simple, it's just a matter of obeying the Bible. Everything has been mapped out in advance.

Homosexuality is always wrong; euthanasia is always wrong; divorce is always wrong; lots of other things are always wrong and others always right. 'If you don't believe me look in the Bible'. That is essentially the argument on one side of church debates. But Jesus replies to the Devil that one must live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. By which he means, I suspect, yes, read the Bible, believe in its authority, wrestle with it till break of day but when it comes to the actual life decisions that we have to make, we are always looking out into an unknown future, in a spirit of trust, faith, courage, in the midst of great bewilderment. In the words of a great writer, the Devil always tempts us to obey yesterday's word of God, when, in fact, it is today that God is doing a new thing that we will only recognise as we do it with God.

Secondly, in all three temptations, The Devil is tempting Jesus to be brilliant, to be a star, and thus to avoid, struggle, difficulty. It's almost the temptation of the bi-polar type. You may not recognise it. I think I understand it a little. All of us have nasty secret inner voices speaking to us. This voice says, 'Why not be a star, you are better than everyone else? Such a voice gets replaced by the voice which says 'you are useless. A failure. Worse than everyone.' Was that, perhaps, the later temptation of the passion and the cross?

So, what's in all this for us?

Let's go back to my original quotation:

'The sinner is at the very heart of Christianity. Nobody is so competent in matters of Christianity. Nobody, except the saint.'

Jesus is the new Adam, the new human being. He is making out of us an extraordinary new way of being human. But he can't do this making out of good people. Good people are the clay that is already baked. They are not pliable. They don't need God. They are bypassing the gospel through their goodness.

Perhaps, during Lent, you might wonder a little, with trust and not fear about your darkness, your sins, your wounds, your fears, those parts of you which need a light shone on them.

That is, accept the invitation to Jesus party, which the righteous don't even know how to want, but where sinners and saints, who belong together, are having a ball. Amen.