

Crossroads. 28th Feb 2021

On May 16th, 1994, Time magazine had on its cover the words, 'There are no devils left in Hell, they are all in Rwanda.' People called it the apocalypse and the beginning of the final days. The United Nations went into Rwanda with some of our forces from the UK, but the mandate they had been given was only for peacekeeping. There was no peace to keep; they were useless, toothless, and frustrated. At least when we met more of the devil's work in Sierra Leone a few years later, we had a different mandate and could actually achieve something - but for many mutilated and traumatized children it was already too late. Given the choice of shooting their parents or

having their arms crudely chopped off with a machete - 'short sleeves or long sleeves' - depending on whether or not you kept your elbows, was not conducive to future mental health, which was one of the reasons why those children who retained intact upper limbs would be filled with drugs and forced into the rebel army. Thoroughly drilled in weapon skills, they were often used as scouts to test out the terrain for mines.

Meeting these children, I was struck and appalled by the emptiness of their expressions, the hardness of their eyes, their total lack of compassion for anyone or any thing - or any thought of even their own lives.

Today, reading my Economist over breakfast - as is my habit - I felt that it, too, could have carried an equally arresting front cover; 'The devil is alive and well - and living in China, amongst other places.'

I am going to leave that statement hanging for the time being and come back to it in a while - just to give you an appetite-whetter.

And while that's on the back burner - so to speak - a good place for the devil - I want to put some more context onto the Genesis and Romans readings.

Unfortunately, the Genesis passage has us completely wrong-footed, which gives the lie to the Pauline interpretation in Romans.

If you read Chapter 15 of Genesis, verses 4-6, you will see, 'Then the word of the Lord came to him (Abram): "This man will not be your heir, (Eliezer of Damascus - probably Abram's Chief Servant), but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars - if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.'

Chapter 16 tells us that Sarai, being unable to give Abram children, suggests to Abram that he sleep with her maidservant, Hagar, so that '...perhaps I can build a family through her.' Abram does just that and the result, as we know, is Ishmael. The beginning of chapter 17 is as we read this morning, with God once more visiting Abram and not only changing both his and Sarah's names, but repeating his promise that Abraham will '...be the father of many nations.'

What we don't read and what is so important to understand about this passage is that Abraham initially thinks that this is about Ishmael - he simply doesn't believe that he and Sarah will have a child between them. If you

read one verse on from where the lectionary had us stop this morning, you would read that once again, 'Abraham fell face down,' (he's done that a lot in this chapter), it goes on to say, '...he laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?" And Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!"

He doesn't think that either he or Sarah is up to the task, but he goes ahead with the covenant of circumcision anyway. In the very next chapter it is Sarah's turn to be visited by agents of God and it is her turn to laugh at their suggestion that she would bear a son.

So it takes three visits from God or his agents to get the message across to Abraham that he and Sarah will, in fact, have a child between them, and even so, he's sceptical. Perhaps that's why God puts him to the test a couple of chapters further on when he tells Abraham to sacrifice his Son Isaac to him - to test Abraham's resolve and trust a second time. Something to ponder on.

The point being that Paul is simply not right when he writes in Romans 4:18, 'Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations...' and again in verse 19, 'Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead...'

and verse 20, 'Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God...'. Abraham wavered like a tree in the wind!

I get it that Paul is trying to bolster up the Romans in their faith, but he would have known the Old Testament scriptures intimately, and was probably hoping that the Romans were not so well-versed in the ancient Hebrew writings, and that he would get away with this clear misrepresentation of the writings of *Genesis* regarding this issue.

This simply highlights for us the necessity of not taking what we read always at face value, and doing our due diligence of research on the passages we read.

Now, going back to the devil, who we left roasting quietly on the back burner.

Some of you will be familiar with the story of Robert Johnson, a black musician who allegedly sold his soul to the devil at the crossroads in return for being able to play the guitar. Johnson was a real person who originally played a none-too-shabby harmonica in the 1930's, but he wanted to play guitar, and by all accounts, he was pretty bad at it - until after that legendary meeting with the devil at the crossroads of Highways 49 and 61 in Clarksdale, Mississippi.

That was, perhaps, an example of a bargain being made, such that both sides get what they want. But there are too many examples of people's souls being stolen now, or simply taken - whether they wanted to lose them or not.

In Rwanda and in Sierra Leone, in Northern Ireland and now in mainland China and Tibet, brutal political regimes kill, capture, and torture those who refuse to believe the lying rhetoric being fed to them. As the song says in the musical 'South Pacific', in order to hate, '...you have to be carefully taught.' This indoctrination is euphemistically called 're-education.' The fact that it is done in camps

behind barbed wire, electric fences and guard towers is not lost on the rest of the world.

But why do I make such a thing about it? Why such a drama? After all, these sort of atrocities have been perpetrated for centuries, one way or another. I would answer my own question by saying that now - instead of telling a Christian that he or she must be a Muslim, or the other way around - or that a Hindu must be a Buddhist, the Chinese regime is telling the Uighur Muslims and the Tibetan Buddhists that they must refrain from 'religious consumption,' and 'follow the party's path.' That is, essentially, to deny their souls.

What is your 'soul'? It is that part of you that is your spiritual essence, your spiritual energy, that part of you that lives on after death.

Why do I believe that? Because I believe in the First Law of Thermodynamics, which states that 'Energy cannot be created or destroyed.' For me, God is the source of that energy, and he implants in every human being that spark of the immortal, that uncrushable, quintessential centre that makes us His creatures. I believe that that essence is in all living things.

So to take and attempt to remove from us the spiritual spark that defines us as beings, by denying us our spiritual lives, is to destroy our

God-like substance - that part of us that is, very definitely, made in His image - that indestructible, divine energy.

What happens if that succeeds? We become empty shells, orphans of the universe - no longer children of God, nowhere to go, absent from God, doomed to eternal separation from Him, a spec of dust for ever in Brownian motion. In other words, in Hell.

[I must digress for a moment before you all reach for the kitchen knives to slit your wrists. I should tell those of you with Scottish ancestry, that the Brown of 'Brownian Motion' was a Scottish botanist and

described this phenomenon 1827. Douglas, you come from a nation of famous inventors - but I'm sure you knew that already.]

I hope, therefore, that you can see where I'm leading you with this; 'What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?'

Our gospel reading asks the pertinent question. And how apposite it is to follow last Sunday's readings on the temptations of Jesus.

Xi Jinping offers human beings nothing but the world - so long as they see it through his

party's spectacles. The soul of a man or woman has no place in his universe. How desperately sad that he and his party are so limited in their outlook. Perhaps he needs to spend some time looking at the night sky when it is not polluted by the light and smog emissions that emanate from China's cities. Can he really look up at the enormity of the universe and only see a space race that he must win? With some of the world's most magnificent mountains on his country's doorstep, can he only see lumps of rock? Truly, it would seem to me that he has already forfeited his soul, and in so doing plays right into the hand of our spiritual enemy; '...what can a man give in exchange for his soul?'

I suggest Xi Jinping has already given it; his spiritual essence, his spark of divine energy, that part of him that would live with our loving God for ever. Truly a lost soul.

Try not to hate such people - they are empty shells. Try to pray for them - because they have lost the capacity to pray for themselves - and that's the worst kind of abandonment you can have; to abandon yourself, and not even know it.