

L1 Evil
SJO. HC. 8&10.30

22.02.2026

Gen 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Rom 5:12-19;
Mt 4:1-11

Unto God be the glory,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

From the earliest days
of the church
the Gospel for Lent 1
has been the story
of Jesus' temptations
in the wilderness.

I've chosen a somewhat
eccentric approach –
focusing on
the figure of Satan.

What are we to make of him?

I suspect this
personifying of evil
is a problem
for us moderns.

St Paul writes somewhere:
*...we fight not against
flesh and blood,
but against principalities
and powers...
in the heavenly realms.*
(Eph 6.12)

But, don't we moderns
think exactly the opposite?

That it's precisely
flesh and blood
against which we fight –
whether it be
Moslem fundamentalists,
liberal secularists,
wealthy élites,
communists,
fascists,
or whomever.

Not invisible
spiritual powers then,
but very visible,
flesh and blood,
human beings.

Likewise,
when it comes to
our own wickedness –
if we acknowledge it at all –
don't we think of it
as within us,
part of us –
- the down side,
- the negative side,
- the shadow side,
of ourselves.

*

What then are we
to make of the fact
that Holy Scripture,
- from Genesis,
- to Job,
- to the Gospels,
- to the Book of Revelation,
reckons with
(in the words of Revelation 12)
...the great dragon
...that ancient serpent,
who is called the Devil
and Satan,
the deceiver of the whole world...?
(Rv 12.9; cf., 20.2)

*

I want to suggest
four things that are missed,
or at least compromised,
by our modern
internalising of evil.

In the first place,
in the Scriptures,
evil is not original
to God's creation,
nor is it original to us.

Recall the last verse
of Genesis 1:
God saw everything
that he had made,
and, behold, it was very good.
(Gen 1.31)

God's creation,
including human beings –
human beings
at every level
of their being –
is *...very good.*

Cranmer gets it right
in his Ash Wednesday Collect:
Almighty and everlasting God,
who hatest nothing
that thou hast made....

It's because God has made
a very good creation –
hates nothing that he has made –
that he sends his only Son
into the world
to rescue it from
the forces of darkness
and destruction,
to restore it to himself.

Which is why
all three evangelists
begin their accounts
of Jesus' temptations
with the startling claim
that Jesus goes
into the wilderness
at the express initiative of God.

In today's Gospel:
*Then Jesus was led up
by the Spirit
into the wilderness
to be tempted by the devil.*
(Matt. 4:1)

St Mark is even more dramatic:
*...the Spirit immediately
drove him out
into the wilderness.*
(Mark 1.12)

As of old, David,
Israel's champion
chosen by God,
went out to meet
Israel's enemy, Goliath,
so now,
creation's champion, Jesus,
is sent out by God
to take on the enemy
that holds God's creation
in thrall.

Evil, then,
doesn't belong anywhere –
it is no part of
God's good creation.

The second thing
we learn about evil
follows from that.

According to the Scriptures,
evil is best described
as distorted good.

In a world which
God has created good,
evil exists only as
the perversion
of the good gifts of God.

*

Which is why,
Satan's temptations
are genuinely seductive.

*...command these stones
to become bread.*
(Gen 4.3)

Doesn't God provide
for his children?

Would it not be proper
for the Messiah
to give full rein
to his compassion
and devote himself
to meeting this most basic
of all human needs?

It is good
to feed the hungry.

But that's Satan's
perversion of the good.

For the Messiah,
as for others,
the good can be
the enemy of the best.

To give priority to
humanity's physical needs
is to strip them
of their dignity –
making them one with
the beasts that perish.

*One does not live
by bread alone,
Jesus responds,
but by every word
that comes from
the mouth of God.*
(Mt 4.4)

Evil, then,
is no part of
God's good creation –
has no proper place;
and it is parasitic,
- a distortion,
- a perversion,
of the good.

Which is why, thirdly,
according to Holy Scripture,
evil is inexplicable.

It doesn't fit.

It has no beginning.

It doesn't come
from anywhere.

No one has ever
been able to explain
the origin of evil.

But, paradoxically,
that's as it should be.

If evil could be explained –
fitted into our accounts
of what is –
then it would be of God,
it would make sense,
and ultimately,
it would not
be evil.

Explanations of evil
in terms of
- yin and yang,
- or that we need evil
in order to appreciate
the good,
make evil less evil,
make it fit,
find it a place
in God's creation.

The Bible never does that.

Indeed, the book of Job
may be read as
an extended denunciation
of all such attempts
to explain or justify evil.

Evil doesn't fit,
nor will it ever fit.

Just before St John's
great vision of the new
heaven and earth
at the end of the
book of Revelation,
he is given to see –
not the reconciliation
of good and evil –
the marriage of
heaven and hell –
but the final defeat
and eradication of evil:

in St John own words:
*...the devil ... the beast,
...the false prophet
...death and hell
were cast into the lake of fire
...and there was found
no place for them.*
(Rev 20.10, 11, 14)

*

The inexplicability of evil
is implied by Jesus' strategy
in responding to the Devil.

His every word
is not his own,
but only the words
of Scripture.

In responding to Satan,
he relies,
- not on his ability
to outwit the evil one,
- but only on
the revealed word of God.

Evil has no proper place.

It is parasitic.

It is inexplicable,
essentially irrational.

Finally,
evil is deceptive.

It masquerades as good.

D'you remember Hamlet:
"The devil hath power
t'assume a pleasing shape"
(Hamlet 2.2.628f.)

Shakespeare is paraphrasing St Paul:
*Satan disguises himself
as an angel of light.*
(2 Cor 11.14)

And St Paul echoes Jesus' vivid denunciation of Satan in St John's Gospel:

*When the devil lies,
he speaks according
to his own nature,
for he is a liar
and the father of lies.*
(John 8.44)

*

The sharpness of Satan's temptations of Jesus is precisely their deceptive character.

Each offers a tantalising alternative to the way of the cross.

The miraculous provision of bread.

A spectacular deed of trust in God's care – jumping from the pinnacle of the temple.

The exercise of worldly wisdom (the devil's means) to achieve results and success – for God's sake, of course!

Surely, any one of these is preferable to the way of the cross –

- the way of folly, shame, and defeat,
- the way of suffering and death.

Satan attacks Jesus, not at a point of weakness, but at his greatest strength –

- his compassion,
- his faith,
- his commitment.

That's his deceptive genius and subtlety.

But Jesus is alert to Satan's wiles.

Placing himself under the authority of scripture, and as such under the authority of God, he literally enacts his response to the first temptation – his life informed and shaped

*...by every word
that comes from
the mouth of God.*

Look to Jesus, then,
and know that he
has unmasked the usurper
and defeated him –
not only in his own life,
but on our behalf.

Finally, – and this
is the special gift
of this morning's Gospel –
we know, in the words
of the writer of the epistle
to the Hebrews, that –
*...we do not have a high priest
who is unable to sympathise
with our weaknesses,
but we have one who
in every respect
has been tested
as we are,
yet without sin.*

*Let us therefore
approach the throne of grace
with boldness,
so that we may receive mercy
and find grace to help
in time of need.*
(Heb. 4:15f.)

Amen.