

Sermon for Sunday 25th Feb, 2024

As usual, this morning's Gospel reading made me think of a quotation from the poets. It's a verse some of you may be familiar with:

Please allow me to introduce myself
 I'm a man of wealth and taste
 I've been around for a long, long year
 Stole many a man's soul and faith

Those of you of a certain vintage in their music tastes will know that as the opening lines of "Sympathy for the Devil" by the Rolling Stones. I was reminded of it because this Gospel contains that curious line where Jesus tells Peter to "Get thee behind me, Satan." Satan features in a great deal of English literature. There's also his famous appearance in Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*, where the first thousand lines are dedicated to his story. Milton describes him falling from heaven thus:

Sheer o're the Chrystal Battlements: from Morn
 To Noon he fell, from Noon to dewy Eve,
 A Summers day; and with the setting Sun
 Dropt from the Zenith like a falling Star,

Particularly among the poets of the Romantic era he became rather fashionable. Byron, especially, liked to think of himself as terribly dashing and Luciferian. William Blake went so far as to say that *Paradise Lost* showed that Milton was "of the devil's party" without knowing it. Popular culture has often continued in this vein, with a sulphuric air cultivated by some of the Victorian artists, and into the twentieth century, where the Rolling Stones not only wrote "Sympathy for the Devil", but released another record called *Their Satanic Majesties Request*. After that, heavy metal's penchant for devil imagery is splashed across the cover of every other album cover or tour t-shirt.

All of this testifies to the fascination, sometimes worrying, obsession that popular culture has with the image of Satan. But it does not get us much further in understanding Jesus' words in today's Gospel. Or does it?

When Jesus declares to Peter "get thee behind me, Satan", I don't think he is not accusing the fisherman from Gallilee of bring the source of all evil in the world. Nor is he suggesting that Peter has a darkly glamorous Mephistophelean ait about him.

To see what he does mean, we might look earlier in the story. We might look at the passage which Mother Kirstine preached on a few weeks ago – Jesus’ time in the wilderness. Lent is a time of prayer, fasting – whatever form that might take – and preparation, and it is forty days because it echoes the time Jesus spent in the desert after his baptism. That, in turn, echoes the forty years which the Israelites spent wandering in the wilderness – Jesus’ time in the desert identified him as the new Moses, the Messiah who will lead the people back to God’s ways. By participating in Lent, we are gesturing towards the time when Jesus went out into the desert, right after his baptism and before he began his public ministry.

You may also remember whom it was that Jesus met in the desert. The Gospels relate that he was surrounded by wild beasts and angels, and that Satan came to him. All those temptations – to turn stone into bread, to cast himself down from the Temple, to bow to Satan in exchange for all the kingdoms of the world – happened at a crucial moment in Jesus’ life. As Kirstine told us, they happened at the turning point when Jesus had been baptized, the Spirit had descended, God the Father had revealed his sonship, and he was about to begin his signs and healings.

This rebuking of Peter surely echoes the conversation with Satan in the wilderness. Which tells us that Jesus sees some parallel between the two situations. He feels this is another temptation. Another person is standing before him, encouraging him to swerve away from the difficult path of obedience and love which he has been sent to follow. This is suggested, to me at least, by the precise wording of the rebuke. “Get thee behind me, Satan.” Perhaps that “behind me” is a familiar idiom in Aramaic, I don’t know – the equivalent of “get away” or “c’mon out of that now”. But it also sounds as if Jesus is implying that this has happened before. “Get thee behind me” – this is in my past, not my future. I already put all this behind me. Do I have to do so again?

We do not know exactly what Peter said, but it was clearly a suggestion that the betrayal and death which Jesus was foretelling didn’t need to happen. And so Jesus addresses him as Satan. Again, we don’t know how it was said – though it is called a rebuke, we don’t know if he sounded as if he was calling his old friend the devil, or whether there was some of that wryness and irony which often appears in Jesus’ saying. “C’mon Satan, out of my way, now.”

And this peculiar way of addressing an old friend tells us something about what is happening in this Gospel. As I mentioned, Jesus doesn't seem to be calling Peter the source of all evil, or the Prince of Darkness, though he does seem to be calling him a tempter. Someone who gets in the way of God's mysterious purposes. In the garden of Eden. In the desert. Before Jesus goes up to Jerusalem.

“Get thee behind me, Satan” links this to those stories: Satan tempted Adam and Eve to fall, and when Jesus was revealed as the Son of God, Satan tried to turn him aside from his path. Now, at this moment when the path has to continue towards arrest and execution, Jesus talks as if he sees Satan standing in his way again. Trying to stop Jesus from atoning for what happened in Eden trying to prevent him fulfilling what his baptism revealed. The second Adam telling an old friend he doesn't need a second Satan.

And this in turn points to something about the role of Satan and evil in the Bible and the Christian tradition. Both St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas insisted that evil had no essence or substance. It was not a thing in its own right, it was simply the absence or privation of God's good presence. It may seem difficult in our day to look around and say evil has no inherent meaning – we seem faced with too many proofs that it has a real, substantial, horrific existence. I think ancient North Africa and medieval Europe would have provided Augustine and Aquinas with similar proof.

But they didn't mean evil couldn't happen or didn't affect people. They meant that evil, at the deepest level, had no real essence. There is no grand power in the universe, equal to God but battling against God. There is no dark wisdom hidden at its centre. It creates nothing, builds nothing, reveals nothing. It is the twisting of purposes, the corroding of potential. And so Satan doesn't get a starring role in the Bible. There is no Byronic Prince of Darkness here. Peter, to misquote the 'Stones, is not a man of wealth and taste. “Get thee behind me, Satan” points to the derivative role Satan plays in this story, trying to hinder God's unfathomable love in its attempt to save humankind. And Jesus recognises it, and walks on through it. Thank God, for our sake, that he did.

Amen.