Sermon for 1st in Lent Year A

Readings: Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11.

i

Have you ever wondered what would have happened if Jesus had said yes to the devil?

I don’t believe for a minute that it would have turned Jesus into an itinerant Satanist. Such a gothic image is unsustainable for even a moment in that culture. I assume, therefore, that if Jesus had said yes to the devil, he would have still believed himself to be the Messiah. He would still have proclaimed the kingdom of God, but his vision of the kingdom and the methods he employed for establishing it would have been totally different to what we find in the NT.

Outwardly, Jesus would still have been a pious Jew, calling for repentance and asking people to follow his lead to the kingdom, but inwardly he would have been compromised with evil and evil thrives best when it can masquerade itself as good.

I suppose Jesus would have become the ultimate “wolf in sheep’s clothing” against which Jesus warns his disciples in Matthew 7:15.

Jesus would have been guilty of allowing the end to justify the means: being God’s appointed Messiah he would have fulfilled that authentic role, but have done so by inauthentic means and towards inauthentic outcomes.

ii

Jesus believed that Israel had been duped and deceived into misunderstanding their vocation to be the people of God. They had succumbed to a Zionist interpretation of their vocation which saw Rome as the great beast of Satan that should be slain. So they followed warrior leaders such as Judas the Galilean (Acts 5:17), a course of action which would eventually result in the disastrous Jewish-Roman wars which broke out in AD66 and brought the state of Judah to a complete and bloody end.

To Jesus, this was not just a matter of political miscalculation, but for him represented the grip Satan exercised over God’s people. Satan was the ultimate wolf in sheep’s clothing who had twisted Israel’s vocation from being a peaceful mission to bless all nations of the earth into a nationalistic military rebellion against Rome.

For this reason, Jesus sighs: “If only you had recognised the things that make for peace” as he enters Jerusalem over the Mount of Olives (Luke 19:42).

For Jesus, the real battle to be fought isn’t against Rome, or primarily with the various Messianic factions of the day, but with Satan himself: this was a spiritual war, an internal conflict of the heart. Which way should he go? Could he resist all the political and militaristic interpretations of the coming Messiah? Could he resist the popularity of feeding the baying crowds with what they yearned mistakenly to receive? Or should he give them the true bread from heaven?

Could he resist the superficial show of greatness which the crowds longed to cheer, could he resist the lure of jumping off pinnacles in favour of climbing onto a cross?

Could he resist promising the people the victory they dreamed of, but at the expense of following Satan’s scheme? Or could he give the people the victory the people needed to defeat Satan and rise again as the renewed people of God?

iii

Paul speaks of the nature of sin in his *Letter to the Romans* which includes an interesting, and at the time, explosive way of looking at the Jewish Law.

Paul starts by contrasting Jesus with Adam, arguing that as Adam’s sin brought death to the many, so Christ through his righteousness would bring life.

In the following verse he says that sin existed **before** the Law was given by Moses. For they that lived before Moses had kept the Law in the sense that it had not existed for them to break it! Yet they still died as a result of sin.

The Law takes sin into account, or reckons sin, by enumerating, identifying and naming sins. The Law’s effect therefore is paradoxically to increase sin, because it sets up so many new ways to fail. In verse 20, Paul says: “The law was added so that the trespass might increase.”

In other words, the Law is also a wolf in sheep’s clothing in the sense that the Law was supposed to be a way of dealing with sin and removing its power, but since those between Adam and Moses also died without breaking the Law of Moses, all the Law can do is further define and categorize sinful behaviours and multiply the grounds for falling short.

Only Christ’s righteousness as the only one without sin is able to restore humankind to life. It is not so much that Jesus can keep the Law of Moses – in several details he conspicuously does not keep the Sabbath Law – but rather that Jesus was without sin. It was sin that killed those between Adam and Moses, not failing to keep the Law.

iv

So where does this all leave us as we progress through the season of Lent?

Well it reminds us how deceptive evil can be, how evil loves to lurk under the cloak of goodness and respectability. How easily we can succumb to ‘the end justifies the means’ way of thinking that has led to the burning of Catholics and Protestants, and witches and the horrors of the Inquisition.

In recent times, evil that lurks under the cloak of kindness has led to the forgiving, pastoral response of sending paedophile priests away to another location on the strength of their apparent contrition and promises to reform.

The deceptive nature of evil allows repression to grow under the cloak of keeping law and order, and permits intrusive surveillance in the name of safeguarding the public, and justifies violence in the cause of stopping the war or saving the environment.

It reminds us that our Lenten fasting is not the means by which we find salvation, but merely the outward sign of our commitment to receive it from Jesus as a gift.

It reminds us that force, bribery, displays of pomp and ceremony or other tools the world may use to sell the latest gizmo, or make the people compliant, are not the ways of Christ.

Most of us still dream at times of coercing the world to respect our religion, even if only in the token of keeping the shops closed on Sundays, or in some parts, by banning the provision of abortion. Most of us suspect that if we could wrestle the philanthropic care of the poor and destitute back out of the hands of western governments we could bribe our way back into people’s lives. Most of us think a bit more deference for our pomp and ceremony and a little respect for our worthy leaders would help re-establish the position of the Church in western society.

But today we are reminded that the only pomp and ceremony that counts is the sign of the cross; the only force we can exert is our own faithful obedience and the only bribe we can offer is the other worldly promise of heaven to come.

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