Sermon for 27th in Ordinary Year B

Readings Job 1:1, 2:1-10; Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16

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The story of how evil came into existence is one that has fascinated human societies from the dawn of civilisation. The Jewish story has some features in common with other religions, but there are some highly specific Jewish aspects that must be recognised.

Firstly, we should note that Jewish thought as we have it by the end of the OT period is thoroughly monotheistic. Evil does not arise from a rival god, but is permitted to exist by an all-powerful and all-loving God. This commitment to monotheism and to the goodness of God gives Jews and therefore Christians a bit of a dilemma.

The Jewish answer is to say that God is love and for humans to be able to love God in return, humans need to have existential freedom. If humans were programmed to love God automatically, they would be free from sin, but it wouldn’t be love. So evil is the result of sin which is a product of freedom which is necessitated by love.

The story in Genesis 3 of Adam and Eve taking the fruit of the tree of knowledge illustrates how humanity has misused its freedom to rebel against God. Yet there is another aspect in this story which is shared by many other religions – and that is the role of the serpent in the Genesis story. The serpent represents a tempting agent from outside the human mind which seeks to corrupt humanity.

Most other religions have a sense that humans may have made bad choices but we have no recollection of ever being free from sin, nor do we have any knowledge about where it came from. Yet it is the instinctive knowledge of many religions that evil has somehow come from “outside” of us and taken possession of us, so although sin is a universal human experience, there is an abiding sense that it shouldn’t really be in us and doesn’t truly belong there.

Whilst polytheistic religions can ascribe evil to other rival gods, monotheistic Judaism has to put it down to the necessary freedom God has given us in order for love to be possible.

In recent generations people in the West have grown reluctant to use words such as Satan and evil, but those words, despite decades of such liberal western thinking, persist because they still serve a purpose. The Bible gives us a language for talking about evil in a way that modern secularism does not. Psychology helps a great deal in understanding human motivation, but it does not give us the ability to address the full picture. This is why even today throughout the western world, people persist in using those old biblical terms such as evil, wicked, satanic and devil.

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When we read the opening of the *Book of Job*, those of us with a Western world view struggle with the idea of angels, fallen angels, and Satan prowling round, apparently with God’s blessing, to see if he can corrupt a good man. This is an attempt from the Wisdom school of theological thinking to address the problem of evil. It shares some of the features we see in the Genesis story, but has developed further.

Wisdom literature such as *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes,* and *Job* was a popular form of religious discourse after the Exile in Babylon. Its style has been influenced by both Babylonian and Egyptian Wisdom traditions. The Bible contains two opposing theological views – in the same way as the contemporary opposition between the strict nationalism of *Nehemiah* (who wants Jews to divorce foreign wives) and the inclusive internationalism of the *Book of Jonah* (in which God saves the Ninevites despite Jonah’s sympathy for Nehemiah’s position).

Within the Wisdom school of thought there were those who believed that each person gets his just deserts in life and all a person must do is choose wisely. If you choose foolishly and follow Mistress Folly rather than Lady Wisdom, you only have yourself to blame. This is the position of *Proverbs.* *The Book of Job* suggests this idea is too simplistic and so in his story he shows how Job manifestly does NOT get his just deserts. The *Book of Job* doesn’t give a final answer to the problem of evil, but does say that evil remains far more mysterious than simply being the result of a person’s poor choices.

This accounts for the role given to Satan in the story of Job. It again reflects that idea that evil exists beyond us, and not just within us. Evil is part of the cosmic framework in which human life is lived.

In the Jewish account of creation and of the source of evil, even the angelic beings that serve God in heaven are given the gift of freedom. Satan, according to Jewish thinking, is an angel that has taken advantage of that gift and used it against God. In the story, Satan tries to show that God isn’t as powerful as he is, because Satan can corrupt a man who has been abundantly blessed by God for his wise and pious ways.

Job’s comforters voice the arguments of the *Proverbs* school of thought and are shown to be unable to explain Job’s plight in such terms.

iii

Our two readings today from the NT represent the Christian contribution to the discussion about the nature of evil.

The Pharisees have a view that is similar to that voiced by the *Proverbs* school of thinking. It treats evil as a rational thing that can be understood and overcome by human effort. Whilst the *Proverbs* school spoke of choosing Lady Wisdom rather than Mistress Folly, the Pharisees believed that by following the Law you could avoid sin and gain salvation. Jesus rejects such an alluring, but erroneous belief.

Jesus belongs to the *Job* school of thought in which evil is far more mysterious and lies beyond the power of human understanding. Evil is a force that humans cannot defeat on their own by Law or pious works. Jesus himself has come to defeat Satan. Evil is a spiritual reality that must be defeated in the spiritual realm and this is what Jesus has come to do.

Therefore, Jesus rejects the Law could ever deliver a person from sin because Jesus points out that the Law itself is a compromise with sin; the Law talks of divorce and there are different schools in the rabbinic tradition which interpret divorce law differently. Jesus refuses to take sides, but says that the Law is trying to find the fairest solution within a sinful human condition, because ideally there should be no divorce. The kingdom of God is not found by those who follow the Law, in whatever rabbinic tradition, for sin and evil are not overcome by human effort alone.

The kingdom of God is entered by those who know their helpless vulnerability and come to God for help, like a small child comes to a parent.

The *Letter to the Hebrews* addresses the conundrum peculiar to Christian faith: if Jesus as the Son of God and heir of all things who is far superior above the angels and is therefore in a position to defeat Satan the fallen angel who has now been put under his feet – as in Genesis 3:15 when the serpent is told that a man will one day crush its head – why is it that we still see Christians struggling with sin and evil?

Hebrews 2:8 “Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him.”

The non-Christian can simply deduce that Christ obviously hasn’t dealt with evil because he wasn’t the Son of God; but Christians respond by saying that the decisive victory has been won on the cross because the resurrection proves that Satan’s greatest weapon, which is final, irredeemable death, has been defeated.

We are still born to love God and love one another and so that demands we must remain free to love or to hate; It is not that evil has been taken away, for evil persists where freedom persists, but evil has been defeated and that defeat we will know upon death when we stand before the Lord in judgement.

Whether we have victory over evil and are welcomed into the house of our heavenly Father will not rest on how well we have chosen Lady Wisdom over Mistress Folly, or followed the minutiae of the Law of Moses, but whether or not we have trusted Jesus to bring us safely through or not, as little children trust their parents.

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