

Trinity 1. 6 June 2021. Revd David Treharne

The Collect: God of truth, help us to keep your law of love and to walk in ways of wisdom, that we may find true life in Jesus Christ your Son. Amen.

Post Communion Prayer: Eternal Father, we thank you for nourishing us with these heavenly gifts: may our communion strengthen us in faith, build us up in hope, and make us grow in love; for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Bible readings:

2 Corinthians 4:13 to 5:1

¹³ But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture—"I believed, and so I spoke"—we also believe, and so we speak, ¹⁴ because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. ¹⁵ Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

Living by Faith

¹⁶ So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, ¹⁸ because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

⁵ For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

Mark 3:20-end

²⁰ and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. ²¹ When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind." ²² And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons." ²³ And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? ²⁴ If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵ And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. ²⁶ And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. ²⁷ But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.

²⁸ "Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; ²⁹ but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin" — ³⁰ for they had said, "He has an unclean spirit."

The True Kindred of Jesus

³¹ Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. ³² A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters^[c] are outside, asking for you." ³³ And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" ³⁴ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵ Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Sermon: The Spiritual Battle, Good & Evil and Discernment.

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Background

One theme of Mark's gospel is the spiritual battle between good and evil and a bigger picture of forces at work beyond what we can see. The dualistic spiritual battle between good and evil will have been an influence on Mark from various writings such as the apocryphal (additional writings not Scripture) book of Enoch (Gt Grandfather of Noah) – a Jewish religious work anything from 300BC to 1st Century BC. The book describes Enoch's visits to heaven in the form of travels, visions and dreams, and his revelations and gives an account of what's wrong with the world. There is all kinds of mythical language ... angels and demons,

dreams and visions... As I have said before, what writings like this are trying to convey is that the world is not as it was created to be... it is out of kilter/balance/harmony at a macro and micro level with unclean spirits now inhabiting not only the world but the lives of human beings... it is only when someone comes to deal with these unclean spirits and banishes evil that the world will finally come right.

It is a document that would have been known to the early church writers and it is thought that they would have been influenced by it. It is important and helpful to understand this context when reading Mark's gospel. For Mark, Jesus is that person, the One who brings in God's reign and sets things right and in Mark's gospel Satan is always behind the opposition to Jesus regardless of who or what the vehicle of opposition may be.

Not getting Jesus... another big theme. Calling good evil and evil good.

In today's reading what we see is people just not getting Jesus, which is another big theme in Mark's gospel... that people, including those closest to him... his family and his disciples... just don't get Jesus and they don't get what the kingdom of God about. Remember Jesus' rebuking of the confessing Peter in Mark 8... "get behind me Satan!"

Jesus' family appear at the beginning and end of the passage. They have heard stories of his ministry and come 'to restrain him' as people were saying he is out of his mind. Perhaps they had come to retrieve Jesus and check him into a clinic for some extended rest and therapy. From the passage we don't get a sense that they were there to support Jesus and back up his actions and words.

However, a more serious accusation follows. A group of religious Scribes arrive and label Jesus as a messenger of Satan rather than God. As well as saying their accusation is illogical... why would Satan help to destroy himself?... Jesus also says their accusation is potentially unforgiveable, for the scribes are calling good evil and evil good. They are confusing light and darkness.

This echoes a verse from Isaiah 5:20. *"Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who turn darkness to light and light to darkness, who replace bitter with sweet and sweet with bitter."*

For example...

Rashness is called courage. Prudence is called timidity. Treachery is called cleverness. Honesty is called stupidity

The intense misjudged self-righteous religiosity manifest here means the Scribes are blind to the truth about good and evil and the Kingdom, silent to reason and numb to love and compassion.

Indeed, there is the danger of them even knowing the truth but being unable to yield to it because of that stubbornness and hardness of heart, and thus potentially entering the arena of blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, where their hearts are so hard and callous towards the Spirit of God that it becomes impossible to repent. What a lesson for us today!

Not getting it today either

I think we have seen evidence of such blindness and hardness in the political scene in America where people's positions have become so entrenched that the Christian faith people profess has become totally incongruent. The vitriol and hatred that has been spoken and acted out in the name of God is quite shocking!

We might look over the Atlantic and think that this is an American problem, but I think we can see it here, where our Christian values and beliefs are jettisoned to justify a political allegiance – deep down we will know when a person, policy or politician is not appropriate, yet we'll vote a certain way. But also when it comes to personal desires and decisions we find all kinds of reasons to justify our position to ourselves, others and God, even though deep down we may know otherwise. If we're not careful we can find ourselves fighting for the wrong side!

Discerning good and evil in our lives and our world

So how might we discern what is evil and what is good and undertake the will of God?

We should pray and search the Scriptures but people will choose Scriptures to match their views. So what else might we do?

Look behind, underneath and within for some of the real battles...

1. Does it bring unity?

One clue is in Jesus' words about *"a house divided against itself cannot stand."* Words famously quoted by Abraham Lincoln in an 1858 speech. Lincoln used the words to contrast the two halves of the United States at the time. One half of the Union allowed slavery, and the other did not. Interestingly some people saw slavery as being a good godly thing, whilst others didn't. Lincoln's message was that if the country continued on this path, it would break in two, which it ultimately did, leading to America's Civil War.

The teaching communicates that unless a group can stand together in unity, it is destined to crumble. Boy, is that a message for Christians and the Church that we could and should have heeded over the years.

When trying to discern if something is good and godly, does it bring people together or does it needlessly divide? Is it wholesome and furthering the values of God's kingdom of justice, mercy, love, kindness, compassion, peace and wholeness?

On occasion there may be a false unity, where people are uniting in something unsavoury, but generally the light and life of God can be found at work in things that bring people together for good and for life and not for harm.

2. Is it reality?

A second clue for discerning good and evil correctly is whether we or others need to go to Specsavers... other opticians are readily available! Are we seeing things for what they really are?

Look underneath and see who may be healed or who may be harmed by what is happening to discern what's going on. Many things may look great on the face of it, but can be deeply problematic underneath. As St Paul says, "even Satan masquerades as an angel of light." 2 Cor 11:14 Only yesterday we were having a conversation at home about how great cheap food or clothing might seem, but the modern slavery that goes on to produce them is deeply concerning. Discern the evil.

"In contrast one commentator says in relation to today's gospel passage, Jesus is scathing of those who cannot recognise goodness and who see only evil. If I want to listen for the voice of God, I need to take care not to heed any voice that speaks only negatively or in condemnation."

And I love this other quote...

"The Pharisee will point out your sin and condemn you, Christ will point out your value and love you."

As we learnt at the Parish weekend in Lee Abbey 2 years ago, we need to be a people that bless one another, speak well of others and fan the flame of what is good and lovely. Discern the good.

3. Does it draw people closer to God

Finally, a third clue to know if something is of God or not, does what is happening have the aim and effect of drawing people closer to God and the things of God?

What might be the motive and outcome of that political decision, that personal decision, that church or community decision?

1. Unity with each other
2. Have eyes to see the reality of good and evil
3. Drawing people closer to the will of God and the things of God

Life will always throw up some situations and decisions that are googly's... we don't know if they are right or not but a little bit more prayerful, communal and scriptural reflection may stop us making hasty, ignorant comments and unwise decisions that unwittingly pit us against Jesus and the reign of God!