

Followers of the Way

The rising challenge of evil

Lynda Rose, 8th January 2023

Isaiah 43: 19-21; John 8: 31-47

In his tweet to welcome in the new year, mayor of London Sadiq Khan wrote, 'In London we celebrate our LGBTQI+ communities every day. Our diversity is our greatest strength.'

Earlier, the same message was hammered out in the huge fireworks display on the Embankment, which not just paid tribute to her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, but explicitly tied her reign to the 50th anniversary of Pride – any suggestion that this interpretation might not perhaps win universal support wasn't even considered. Or perhaps, more to the point, it was just thought irrelevant, because our society might talk about free speech and diversity ... but the reality these days is that you're only allowed to express views that conform with what's seen as the new LGBTQ+ morality. Which, of course, the traditional teaching of the Church, with its emphasis on things such as monogamy and sexual purity, doesn't.

Well that's the secular approach, but how did Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, respond? What was his new year message? Did he condemn society's moral corruption and take a stand for Christian truth? Did he call people to repent? No, he took the opportunity to declare that the greatest challenge facing the UK today was our broken care system, and he called on the government to fix social care, especially for the elderly. Which of course, as an aim in itself, is commendable ... but it entirely ignores the call of the Church to defend the faith and protect the vulnerable from attack – to act as the moral compass of our nation.

Sadly, the truth would seem to be that, in its quest to stay 'relevant', the Church – which includes all denominations – has abandoned its call, allowing evil to grow strong. To become arrogant!

We are greatly mistaken if we think this doesn't matter.

Two thousand years ago the long-awaited Messiah was born in a stable in Bethlehem. We know from the Bible that God had begun to plan for this as soon as Adam and Eve came under bondage to evil in Eden. From the moment they fell, He began to devise a strategy to win us back – and in the only way that was actually possible, by sending His Son, because there was no way we could get back by ourselves. From that moment, battle became inevitable.

In Genesis 3:15, God says, '... I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.' This is generally taken as an oblique reference to Jesus, but it's fair to say that when Jesus did come, exactly who and what He was came as a complete surprise. God was moving to reclaim His own, we know that, but Jesus wasn't at all what was expected and, from the beginning of His ministry, He came into conflict with the religious leaders of the day, who relentlessly criticised and attacked Him.

The reasons are actually quite simple. For a start, Jesus didn't uphold the status quo. Even worse, He claimed to be directly sent by God, who He called His father – which the Pharisees saw as heresy. But there was another problem too. In first century Palestine, the common expectation was that the Messiah would be some kind of ace military leader, who'd save the Jewish nation by driving out the Romans and restoring the kingdom to Israel, and Jesus didn't fit this mould at all – in fact he rejected force completely, calling his disciples to meet violence with love. Jesus was so much more than they expected!

How is this relevant to what's happening today? Well, Jesus was adamant that there could be no compromise with evil, and that's got to be relevant to what's happening today. But I think the real point to be made is that God is moving, and He's moving in ways that are infinitely bigger than anything we can imagine. And that has to be too, when you think about it, because God is infinitely bigger than we can imagine. More than that, God sees the whole picture, and He knows what has to be done. Just as He did, when He sent Jesus to die upon the cross.

Which brings us back to Jesus, God's own Son, who knew exactly the spiritual battle that was going on, and that there could be no compromise with evil. He knew that He had come to save mankind, and that it would involve His own sacrifice. But He also knew that to receive salvation – His gift – people would have to choose which side they were on, and they would have to reject evil. A little bit of evil was not okay.

We are in that same battle today. Those of us who believe have been saved by Christ's death on the Cross, and restored to that direct relationship with God for which we were first created, but Satan is still loose in the world, and will remain so until Christ's return, which means that the battle is still going on! More to the point, as foretold in Scripture and ahead of Christ's return, evil is once again growing in power and is challenging God for control. Over the last few centuries, Satan's tactics may have changed, but at heart they're still essentially the same. And Jesus put his finger on it when he said in our reading (v.44), '... (Satan) was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.'

Just as in Eden, Evil works through misrepresentation and manipulation and, sadly, many are still falling prey to the lies and being led astray. And, let's face it, evil can appear very attractive – very 'loving' and tolerant even – while what we call 'righteousness' can all too easily be portrayed as bigoted, judgmental, repressive ... unnatural.

The truth is that many today have become actively blinded by the lies and misrepresentations put out by evil, which is becoming increasingly aggressive as it gains power. What we saw at the start of the year – and indeed what we're seeing daily – is the growing malevolence and arrogance of the spirit that stands in direct opposition to God. Over the last century it has been so successful in its covert attempts to reframe morality, that it feels now it can throw off

all restraint. What we are witnessing is literally an ideological takeover, a coup, that will not allow dissent.

But evil miscalculates when it imagines God can be ignored or silenced. The One who sent His own Son for our redemption has not forsaken us, and He is still Creator God, the God of power. That power is infinitely greater than anything the enemy can call in aid, and the battle now has entered a new phase. Yes, evil has beguiled many and has grown strong. And in its attempt to rebrand values, it has grown increasingly arrogant. Over the last twenty odd years, God has held back judgment in order to allow us every chance to return voluntarily to Himself. But, by and large, men and women have rejected that chance, and now God is responding. God has entered the field, and the action He takes now will be not just powerful, but it will be unexpected.

Isaiah 43: 19-21, 'See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it...?'

There is no question but that the battle lines have been drawn. What people have got to realise is that, just as when Jesus walked the earth, there can be no compromise with, or avoidance of, evil. The Archbishop of Canterbury would do well to take note. This is not bigoted judgmentalism or hatred, it's salvation. Evil knows exactly what's at stake, and it's attempting to quash all opposition. But God is moving now in unimaginable power. He has given us chance after chance to repent, protecting us from the consequence of our choices – but we have refused to listen, and now the Rubicon has been crossed. As result of our disobedience, we are a people under judgment ... and I believe something terrible is coming.

What happens over the coming months will, I believe, be unexpected. Some things will be frightening, and we will all of us face challenges, but we are not to fear. God is saying to us now that He is in control, and He calls people of faith to trust. But we are also being called to battle, and that means that we have to stand – we are still being called to seek out the lost. This is a battle that belongs 100% to the Lord. His is the fight now, but, for our part, we are called to obedience. So at the start of this new year, whatever may lie ahead, let's resolve to stand on and uphold the word of Christ, who has promised that He will never leave us nor forsake us – because in Him we *will* have victory.