

You have to wonder what’s going on in these Gospels for the first three Sundays in Lent. There seems to be an obsession with the devil. In the first, Jesus is tempted by Satan in the wilderness. In the second, he is found performing an exorcism. And now today, he is accused of casting out the devil in the name of the devil. So just what *is* going on? The *Prayer Book* selection of readings chooses these three gospels at the start of Lent to illustrate the purpose of Our Lord’s ministry from its very beginning. The Gospel writers are setting the scene. And the scene is spiritual warfare. The devil knows who Jesus is and so he immediately throws all his hellish nastiness at him right from the start. When I read these startlingly dramatic Gospels I am reminded of other great works of literature which begin by announcing the mother of all battles.

*The Iliad* erupts into life with the words μηνιν αιειδε Πηληιαδεω Αχιλλης ουλομεπηω - *Sing, O Goddess the anger of Achilles*. And Virgil begins *The Aeneid* with: Arma virumque cano, *I sing of arms and the man*. And in these first Lent Gospels we see Our Lord engaged in a war for the salvation of the whole world: the greatest battle of all and the one which ends with his death on Good Friday. But then I am running away with myself. Let us look closely at this spiritual warfare waged between Christ and the forces of evil. It is *the* battle for the human soul, for your soul. And so if you call up your imagination – which is a faculty of the soul – you ought to be able to imagine this battle.

Think of the noise of the Somme, the twenty-four thousand daily shells upon Verdun, the tank Battle at Kursk with two million men in deadly struggle. The fight between Our Lord and the powers of evil is like the last battle, Armageddon, being fought out in a delirium in your head, your heart and your soul. It is a dirty fight because the devil is not an officer and a gentleman: he is a cheat and a liar. The *casus belli* is nothing less than Christ’s rescue of the mankind from evil and torment.

I must here make a confession. The hardest thing I have to do as a parish priest – harder even than trying to cope with diocesan bureaucracy modern doggerel prayers and trashy new hymn tunes – is to persuade people that evil is real and evil is rampant. To the modern mind, evil is something we suffered before we got electric lights and flush toilets. How can you talk about evil in these glorious days of plasma telly and ubiquitous iphones? Modern society is secular, materialistic and trivial. And the chief religious dogma of modernity is *progress*. But progress is a superstition and a delusion. Progress is not happening. We think of ourselves as infinitely better than our forefathers. When we wish to revile something as the worst possible, we call it *medieval*. And yet there were more people murdered in the wars and genocides of the 20<sup>th</sup> century than in all the previous centuries added together. Or am I getting something wrong here? Were Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Mao and Pol Pot merely fictional characters in a game on

*Playstation?* Were the purges, the gulag, the concentration camps, the Cambodian genocide, the two million people slaughtered in the Congo just figments of a Christian priest's diseased imagination – my imagination?

Look around at our own cities. The depressing catalogue of murders, rapes and violent crime, compounded by the lying statistics – often demonstrated - of the progressive lobby to make things seem better than they actually are. The debauchery and banality of public life in the streets and throughout the electronic media. Abortions at 200,000 every year and used as a form of contraception. Practices which were for centuries defined as mortal sins now only lifestyle choices. The very difference between good and bad, truth and falsehood denied in favour of *diversity, deconstruction* and mere opinion.

But you don't have to study history or even to look out on your own city. To understand that Original Sin is still as strong as it always was, you need look no further than into your own heart, your own motives – our selfishness, petty avarice, narrow-souled self-regard, preferring ourselves. But we do not like to contemplate the darkness within. And that is why, comforted by our shiny gadgets and cosy in the central heating, we sing not of arms and the man and of spiritual warfare but of *progress* and *modernising* and above all that most vacuous slogan of all our decayed political parties: *change*.

But spiritual warfare is raging whether we accept the fact or not. And where we choose to stand in this war will determine our everlasting destiny. With all this in mind, let us turn to Our Lord's confrontation with evil in today's Gospel. *He was casting out a devil. And when the devil was gone out, the people wondered.* The word for *wonder* here is not like the word in *I wonder if it's going to rain?* The word is εθαυμασσω – they were astounded, shaken to the core, gobsmacked. Then the accusation, *He casteth out devils through Beelzebub, the chief of the devils.* Beelzebub was the devil consulted by King Ahazia at the Philistine city of Ekron. The name means *Lord of the Flies*.

Jesus ridicules his accusers: *If Satan be divided against himself, how shall his kingdom stand?* These words are at once a judgement and a prophecy. For Satan *is* divided against Satan and his kingdom will be destroyed by the power of Christ. The devil is not merely at war with God: because he is a crook and a liar, he is also at war with all the other devils. Hell is called *chaos*. And the devil is ultimately on a self-destruct mission, but he does a hell of a lot of damage in the process.

Hell is emptiness. It is where no good exists. It is your waking nightmare of tumbling into a loveless, lonely abyss. Hell is your own soul without God. So Jesus warns against this deadly emptiness: when the devil returns, he finds the cleansed soul *swept and garnished* but empty.

*So: He goeth and taketh to him seven other spirits more wicked than himself and they enter in and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first.*

This is the real terror of hell: nothing; negation; denial. The refusal even to try to cultivate some goodness in your life, the unwillingness to attempt to respond to God and, by his Grace, put on some positive virtue. The bland refusal of God's grace out of sheer idleness, indifference. It leads to the spiritual malaise known as *Accidie* which is listlessness and depression, the sense of tedium, that nothing makes any difference – as the kids say, *It's boring!* In the Bible it is called *the pestilence that walketh in darkness and the sickness that destroyeth in the noonday*. I have seen vivid and frightening examples of this emptiness. When I was a country vicar in Yorkshire, they built a new housing development on the edge of the village. These houses were quickly filled by up-and-coming businessmen and sales-executives who commuted from the village to their offices twenty-five miles away in Leeds. I discovered many pastoral problems among the wives they left at home from seven in the morning until late at night.

These attractive, energetic young women had the breakfast things cleared and the house spick and span by nine-thirty. There was nothing left for them to do then except read *Cosmopolitan* and *Take A Break*, switch on the pop music station or a nuts 'n' sluts show on daytime TV. After a few months of this, many were taking to the *Martini* bottle by ten in the morning. They had thought they were coming to a country idyll. They soon found themselves going up the wall. In many cases the next step was to the doctor's and a repeat prescription for *Valium*. Some began obsessive-compulsive activities like washing their hands thirty times a day or re-shampooing the already immaculate fitted carpet. Others took up the hobby of casual sex with passing tradesmen and their marriages were destroyed. Others were admitted into the wonderful choice of mental hospitals afforded by the ancient city of York.

Well, we were warned: *The devil finds work for idle hands*. The empty soul is the perfect *des res* for a multitude of devils. You don't believe in devils? Have it your own way. I only know those women were in torment.

The kick in today's Gospel story is in the last few lines. A woman who had witnessed the exorcism and heard all that Jesus had to say pipes up with, *Blessed is the womb that bare thee, and the paps which thou hast sucked!* In other words, *My, didn't he speak well! Beautifully! He's a really charismatic preacher!* Now, if I were something really cold and rigid – like an academic – I should say, *Here Jesus exposes the aesthetic fallacy*. He says, *Yea, rather, blessed are they that hear the Word of God and keep it!* In other words, it is not enough to admire Jesus. It is not enough to join the Society of Cultural Antiquarians and regard the Bible as *great literature* or to think of church music by such as Bach, Lassus and Purcell as the best free concert in town. Jesus calls us to action. You are not to be content to leave the house of your soul swept and

garnished – but empty. We must be filled with Christ-likeness: hearing his word and keeping it: filled with it.