

Readings – Romans 12:9-21, Matthew 16:21-28

But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

May I speak in the name of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Last week I watched two films that depicted how people convinced they are fighting injustice can descend into barbarism precisely because of their moral certainty. Both looked back on events in the late 1960s and 1970s. The first was Sam Green and Bill Siegel’s insightful documentary on The Weather Underground, the second was Bernd Eichlinger’s emotionally overwhelming dramatization of the story of The Baader Meinhof Complex. On both sides of the Atlantic, young people outraged by the nightly television scenes from Vietnam, with America killing civilians in great numbers, themselves resorted to bombing and killing. None of this produced any of the justice and liberation they sought. In the end, both organisations found the world moved on rapidly and left those in them behind: on the run, or marooned on the edge of society, or imprisoned. The illusion that if only we ourselves ran the world, then everything would be wonderful, is a dangerous one.

First century Palestine was a place of political and religious ferment and frequent outbreaks of religiously-inflected political violence. Utopianism was as prevalent there as it was in the Chicago or West Berlin of 1968. To understand how Jesus calling Peter “Satan” fits into that world, we need to go back to the episode in Matthew’s Gospel that immediately precedes Jesus beginning his public ministry. It’s the bit where Jesus is “led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil”. The last of the three temptations Satan puts before Jesus is to offer him all the kingdoms of the world in return for His worship. Jesus refuses and the Devil flees. Jesus’ goal is not power or conquest, nor even to initiate an enlightened political order, but the service of His heavenly Father.

Peter stumbles into being a bit of a devil without realising it, for he places exactly the same temptation before Jesus, to renounce His mission from the Father and seize earthly power. We know that power comes into it for the passage immediately preceding this, the Gospel at last Sunday’s service, is the one where Peter is the first person to correctly identify Jesus as the Messiah. The Messiah was expected to be an extraordinary God-sent leader who would restore The Temple to holiness from the way it had been spiritually despoiled by the Herods, and deliver the Jewish people from Roman Occupation. It was thought the Messiah was going to, if you will, Make Jerusalem Great Again.

It is easy to interpret today’s Gospel as being entirely about the personal relationship between Peter and Christ, and Peter’s inability to understand Christ spiritually, but that misses how politically charged it is. Everybody knew when the Messiah arrived in Jerusalem he was going to boot out the hated Roman occupiers, and that meant his closest followers were going to be generals of a liberating army and powerful figures in the new order. So Jesus isn’t just forewarning Peter about the Passion and the Cross, He’s telling Peter that his future is going to be very different than the one of earthly power and triumph he’d just convinced himself of.

Yet Peter’s dreams of political power misunderstood even his own community, the group of apostles that Jesus had gathered around himself, for it contained both Simon, a member of the Zealots, who held to a violent utopianism with at least a passing resemblance to that of the Weather Underground and the Baader Meinhof Group; and Matthew the collaborating tax collector, who worked for the Romans. We think our arguments about Brexit can get hot and heavy; there must have been some pretty punchy debates around the campfire between those two!

Keeping that in mind helps us avoid another misinterpretation of today’s Gospel and other passages like it, which is to reject any Christian involvement in politics. Power and imbalances in power are an objective reality and always will be; to pretend that Christian can retreat into a holy huddle, cut off from and superior to the world, simply abandons those who are victimised through their powerlessness. We have a duty to work for what we understand to be the common good and to combat structures of injustice and oppression. Where things tend to go wrong is when we start to think that only we care about truth, goodness and order; and when we forget that all human

perspectives, including our own, are partial and all human ideas imperfect. Most of all, things go wrong when we forget to love others as ourselves, and seek to impose our will on them by force. That often destroys us as surely as those we seek to dominate; it destroyed Richard Nixon just as surely as it destroyed so many members of the Weather Underground and the Red Army Faction.

Our faith ought to lead to a transformation of life that far transcends any particular ideology or programme of policies. That beautiful passage from St Paul's Letter to the Romans we have just heard sets out what that might look like for a Christian community that, like this one and most healthy ones, transcends many divisions, political and otherwise. It starts: "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour." The Christian manifesto is not a series of prescriptions but a proclamation of hope; it does not proclaim that we will never get things wrong, but instead that Jesus Christ remains with us even after our worst mistakes, and that the Father will use our mistakes to do good in ways we could never have conceived of.

Peter thought he was going to be a leader of a triumphant army winning an earthly victory. That victory would soon have been found as hollow as all triumphs of earthly power, with Peter remembered only as an obscure figure by those interested in the history of the Ancient Near East. Christ spared Peter this by bringing him to absolute defeat – for both of them – and then transforming that defeat through the arms that He stretched out in love on the Cross into a victory that Peter could never have thought to wish for himself. Peter's fantasies of power were transformed into the reality being the Rock of a community of love that unites billions of people today, two thousand years later. The Church, in which Peter's name is still exalted, has proved more enduring than any empire, any ideology, or any earthly ruler.

It is in the name of that transcendent community of love that we welcome baby Rosie this morning. We offer her not the hope that everything in her life will always be wonderful, but that she will never be alone even in her hardest times, and that her ultimate calling is for eternal glory. For every Christian that involves, as it did for Peter, journeying with Jesus to Jerusalem, for we know that life is sometimes crucifying for everyone. But we also know that isn't the end of the story. It is so often only when we think that we've lost all hope that God can open the way to futures much better than anything we can imagine for ourselves.

And now to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit be ascribed all might, majesty, dominion, and power, as is most justly His due, now and forever. Amen.