

War and the Devil: Sermon Preached at St John's, Devizes, Sunday 6th March 2022 (The First Sunday in Lent)

Readings – Romans 10:8–13; Luke 4: 1–13

“Jesus ... was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of my favourite films is a movie made eleven years ago named *Margin Call*. It is a fictionalised version of 24 hours in the life of a big New York merchant bank at the start of the 2008 financial crisis.

In the small hours of the morning, two well-tailored bankers assimilate the possibility of the world economy collapsing thanks, in part, to their extreme investment risks. At one point, the younger one turns to the older and says, “This is bizarre. It’s like a dream.”

“Oh, I don’t know”, comes the reply, “Seems like we may have just woken up.”

The world of these men and women collapses in the space of a day, to their shock and horror. As the movie progresses, however, it becomes apparent that they knew all along that they were following a path that was unsustainable, but one that was making them all rich. They were lying to the rest of us, of course, but mostly they were lying to themselves. Part of the movie’s power comes from the way it depicts how the system rapidly seduces the young graduate trainees into believing that this world of greed and lies is normal, even good.

Ironically, the wise old trader in that exchange was Kevin Spacey – soon afterwards disgraced, and deservedly so, for using his artistic genius as bait to exploit young men who dreamed of being stars.

Both the movie and the real-life story of its star are metaphors for the world of the last thirty years, which indulged itself in the myth that humanity was starting to escape the restrictions of its nature, and that freedom and prosperity

for all could be best ensured by each of us pursuing our desires and demands to the maximum extent.

We need to face facts: we are never far away from the wilderness, where the Devil lurks.

Lent, involving an intentional laying aside of at least some of our desires is an antidote to the assumption that happiness is found in the gratification every human desire. That other faiths also exhort their followers to keep periods of fasting should tell that far from being a Church-invented means of social control, Lent touches the deep and God-given needs of human beings, and human societies.

The wilderness is a place beyond civilisation. We now live in a geopolitical wilderness where the post-Cold War order has collapsed. I last preached from this pulpit a fortnight ago: the world that existed then is no longer in being. The European order has changed more in the last eleven days than in the previous thirty years. Points of policy that had been central not only to political decision-making but countries' entire national identity have been abandoned in days. We have Sweden in the process of abandoning neutrality, Germany abandoning post-War pacifism, Britain talking about the idea of Europe in almost sacred terms, and Switzerland freezing dirty money hidden in its banks.

Personally, I am in favour of each of these decisions, and have been for a long time. Yet I am frightened by what they represent. If the leaders of Western democracies, including our own, are abandoning in a matter of hours what had always been presented as cardinal points of political principle or national interest, what does it say about their judgement more generally? In how many other areas is the judgement of our leaders about the state of the world unsound? How many other lies have they been telling themselves and one another? And to what extent have we, members of the public in free democracies, been colluding in those lies because they were convenient to us, too?

What sort of dreamworld were we living in?

In today's Gospel, the Devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world "in an instant". Earthly power will be Christ's if He worships Satan. This temptation in the wilderness takes place immediately before the start of Jesus' public ministry and seems to be a necessary prelude to it. For soon will come the adulation of the crowds, and along with them the endless streams of people who are sick or disturbed seeking His healing. The incessant demands on Christ to solve the world's problems must have tempted Him to take power – as his followers wished.

In the Garden of Eden story, humanity grasps knowledge of good and evil that had previously belonged only to God, and therefore experiences the Fall. Yet God doesn't wipe this knowledge from our minds, and return us to the pre-Fall state, but instead grants us free will, sharing something of His own nature. The remedy for the Fall was not a theocracy with Christ at its head, but the Cross, and then through it the Resurrection. The proclamation of the victory of life in the face of murder subverts the egotistical will to power in every era, every culture, every political system.

This lies at the other end of our Lenten journey in six weeks' time, so for now, let us simply keep in mind how dangerous it is to assume that political power on Earth can solve our deepest problems. Mr Putin is a classic case of this. He intends to make Russia great again through tanks and artillery barrages and threats with nuclear weapons, and instead risks reducing the Russian people to penury.

Let me bring in another quote from the now disgraced Kevin Spacey, this time from the 1995 movie *The Usual Suspects*: "The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist."

In 1995, it was easy to pretend the Devil didn't exist – the Cold War had ended peacefully, apartheid had fallen, peace was coming to Northern Ireland, and even Israel and the PLO had signed the Oslo Accords. Nightmarish wars to

settle the succession to Yugoslavia were taking place, but these were explained as the final death rattle of the old order. We were making a new world.

Many people say that the idea of the Devil is a silly myth that diverts our attention from the real sources of evil in the world. Well, if the Devil is a myth, I'd rather live with that than the much sillier myth that we could somehow organise and medicalise evil out of the world through building the right political structures, by understanding our psychology, and then truly liberating ourselves from all that restrains us.

We tried to domesticate the Devil, yet he still taunts us over the burning ruins of Mariupol'. As indeed he did over the ruins of Fallujah that our government helped create although, of course, we chose not to think of ourselves in those terms. The Devil taunts us whenever a talented actor or a supposedly holy clergyman uses their gifts from God to make life hell for those under their power.

So pray as you have never prayed before. Pray for your own soul, and remember to take good care of it. Pray for Ukraine and its people, for a peace that is not built on injustice to them, and for all the conflicts in the world which are forgotten and ignored.

If there is an uplifting message today it is this: the truth does ultimately set us free even if its arrival seems unwelcome. It is only in the wilderness that we become fully aware of who we are, of how fragile life and civilisation are. It is in the wilderness that we learn to be thankful for what we are, and to think of how we can help those who have much less.

It is when we follow Jesus Christ in the wilderness, and on to the Cross, that we find new life.

Now praise, glory, and honour be to God who is with us in times of plenty and times of austerity, in all the earth and for ever and ever. Amen.