

good and evil

a sermon preached on the
sixth sunday after pentecost

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at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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The lections: Isaiah 55.10-13; Ps 65.1-13; Romans 8.1-11; Matthew 13.1-23

Two weeks ago we read of the lament of Jeremiah, the prophet, remaining, as he did, in the outskirts of Jerusalem while the influential wealthy of the city were exiled to Babylon, in destitution, in shame, in horror of their lost privilege. The sins of the chosen ones being wrung from a proud people who had turned away from God.

This morning we hear from another prophet – Deutero Isaiah – writing of events some seventy years later in greatly changed circumstances. I say Deutero Isaiah, because the prophecy of Isaiah is recognised as three books, not one, hence proto, deutero and trito Isaiah. Deutero Isaiah comprises chapters 40 to 55 and begins with ‘Comfort, O comfort ye my people says your God’, those unforgettable opening words of Handel’s Messiah.

Over the seventy years that have elapsed, the landscape for the Jews in Babylon has changed substantially in their favour. Nabonidus, the Babylonian king, has been defeated by the Persian Cyrus the Great, a leader of great compassion, who decided to set the Israelites free, and ultimately restore them and their stolen treasure to Jerusalem.

Isaiah at this point is a joyful counterpoint to Jeremiah’s lament. What had been death was now life, desolation was now fullness, shame was now glory. The sinful city can now be vacated by Israel to recreate their alternative community in Jerusalem, chastened, of course, by the experience to remake their faith in God. The penitential cycle has run its course.

Israel ought to remember that their destruction was halted by a Gentile, Cyrus, whom Isaiah identifies as God’s instrument. A Gentile has reimagined the separation between the two cities, the city of God and the city of this world, Jerusalem and Babylon. A Gentile has restored them. It was not their power, or their dignity or their majesty, but an outsider with whom in other circumstances they would not even eat.

This history demonstrates that not only in the Jews but also in the Gentiles there is a capacity for good and a capacity for evil. It is almost as if there cannot be one without the other, not, at least until the realisation of the Kingdom, the ultimate alternative society.

Paul in Romans takes a somewhat different approach. For him it seems a person is either totally good or totally evil. He marks a stark alternative between those who are in Christ and those are not when he writes: ‘For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death’.

Paul is, in his inimitable style, uncompromising.

‘To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law – indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.’

For Paul, the line between good and evil runs between people – you can only be one or the other, good or bad, black or white. Paul seems to have forgotten his own words in Chapter 1 of Romans, ‘For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith”.’ These words contain a quite different idea of the person, which Martin Luther found, realising that righteousness (let’s call it goodness) comes by grace, not through human effort and so is available to all even the sinner.

Sometimes I think Paul needed to lighten up a bit.

On Wednesday evening I attended the induction of the new Vicar of St Faith’s Burwood, the parish in which I live. The Bishop [of what we used to call the Southern Region, an evangelical] in his sermon observed that he had come to realise that the line between good and evil runs not between people but through them. This theological position bears out, I think, my reservation over Paul’s uncompromising view of the world.

Matthew’s Gospel today is the well-known parable of seed falling on unyielding hard or rocky ground or amongst thorns and failing to germinate, while seed that falls on good soil thrives. Matthew appears to set up the same dichotomy of good and evil, that if you are one who is hard of heart perhaps, or stony, or thorny, or maybe prickly, then the good seed of the Gospel will not take root in you, and you will fail to meet the standards of the Kingdom. Lost, cast off, no good. Whereas if you are a ‘good person’ then the seed will be sprout and all will be flourishing.

We know Matthew is writing for a new Jewish-Christian community within Israel and is possibly seeking to differentiate his community from the one his people come from, so a black and white image may serve his purposes. But he doesn’t sound like Jesus. There is no sense of charity or redemption in his words. That is, until you pay attention to what happens in good soil, in good people, that the yield of the Gospel is maybe 30 times, maybe 60 times, or even 100 times.

This is classic biblical hyperbole, intended, I believe, to direct our attention away from the hardness of Matthew’s inner Pharisee and so to show us the potential for good in people. So, following Isaiah, and the Bishop, if the line between good and evil runs through the person, we must understand the power of the grace of the Gospel to outweigh that which is regrettable in the person and to amplify the good, 30 times, maybe 60 times, or even 100 times.

This is the same hyperbolic potential for the Gospel that Isaiah identifies in Cyrus the Gentile, the same grace Martin Luther discovered reading Romans Chapter 1, the same grace that liberates each of us and this community from that which weighs us down. And so we ought to rejoice!