

Baptismal Promises Week 3: Do you renounce evil?

Main points of sermon 24 March 2019

Readings: Genesis 4: 1-13 and Luke 4: 1-13

Introduction: thinking about the wonderful opportunity baptism/christening services bring parish congregations. 8 baptisms in a year might bring as many as 280 people into services. The simple question 'did you enjoy that service' can lead to conversations about faith and maybe other requests for baptism. The Shaped Every Day evening with Bishop Martyn and Bishop Guli this Thursday 28th March at St. Paul's – an opportunity to think more about our everyday faith.

In the midst of christening celebrations, the question 'Do you renounce the deceit and corruption of evil' might seem a bit overdramatic but it is relevant to today's world where it tends to be people other than ourselves who are described as evil. The challenging question is whether we too are affected by evil influences or could be drawn into being so affected.

In the case of Cain and Abel, the downward spiral all starts with a sense of injustice or unfairness felt by Cain over how his harvest gifts from the soil made as an offering to the Lord in worship did not gain the same favour as his brother Abel's gift. An ordinary situation which could happen to any of us.

Cain doesn't decide to be a bad person; but allows a sense of personal injustice and envy to fester away inside him, not dealing with the feelings of anger that grow out of it; and ultimately those festering attitudes break out into action, leading to the murderous moment of killing his brother.

This demonstrates that the baptismal challenge to renounce evil speaks into those everyday situations of human life that we encounter. It speaks not only to our actions, but also to our thoughts and feelings which affect our behaviour and our actions and thereby impact the lives of others. Cain cannot hide his feelings ('his face was downcast').

Learning from the example of Jesus' temptation. A large part of the suggested actions Jesus is tempted with might not seem to be evil in themselves. Making some bread out of stone because you are hungry; having fun throwing yourself off a parapet (knowing angels will bear you up); even taking charge of the kingdoms of the world, knowing all the good you could do in that role.

The real evil to be renounced here is the temptation for Jesus to put himself at the centre of it all. 'If you are the Son of God' begin two of the temptations. These would draw Jesus towards an understanding of himself as the Son of God, where he is deciding what is right and good, independent of the will of God the Father. Yes, if all the kingdoms of the world were given to him, think of all the good he could do to reorganise the world. But what is 'good' in that situation would be defined by him (as also influenced by that deceitful voice in his ear), rather than by his Father's scriptural definition of what is good.

And so this is why Jesus' responses all focus on putting God at the centre of what is right and good: 'you shall not live by bread alone' (but on every word that comes from the mouth of God); 'worship the Lord your God and serve him only'; 'do not put the Lord your God to the test'; it is about accepting the will of God and the ways of God first and foremost in everything.

Which ultimately is what Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane when, wrestling with the calling (as true Son of God) to go to the cross, he finally surrendered to His Father 'but your will be done'. And through that final surrender Jesus did, in a totally different way, become the centre, as we recall this morning in bread and wine, Jesus became the centre and source of our salvation, with the grace, forgiveness and mercy that flows from his sacrificial death and resurrection.

And so for ourselves, if we are to follow the example of Jesus in renouncing evil, it will mean seeking to put God's ways at the centre of our struggles, respecting and working with God's plan for our lives, even when, like Cain, we may be carrying envy, jealousy or a sense of personal injustice in our heart.

Further reading

Pilgrim Turning to Christ; A course for the Christian Journey by Stephen Cottrell, Steven Croft, Paula Gooder and Robert Atwell.

The Screwtape Letters, by CS Lewis. Exploring the deceit of evil through imaginary letters from a senior devil to a junior devil.

Questions

Below are some questions that you might like to reflect on, individually or in groups.

1. What stayed with you from listening to Richard's sermon on Sunday?
2. What is it that sometimes makes evil so attractive?
3. What other emotions, as well as envy, make us act badly?
4. What might we practically do to help each other renounce evil?
5. In his testing in the wilderness, Jesus used verses from Deuteronomy in responding to the three temptations recorded in Luke 4. Can we think of any other Bible verses or stories that might help us renounce evil?
6. How can we make best use of the opportunities that our occasional baptism/christening services bring us?

Prayer

Eternal God,
give us insight
to discern your will for us,
to give up what harms us,
and to seek the perfection we are promised
in Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Some ideas for prayer this week

1. Meditate on the question and response; 'Do you renounce the deceit and corruption of evil?' **'I renounce them.'**
2. Pray for those who, as supporting family or godparents, will be attending baptisms/christenings at ST. Peter's in the coming months.
3. Pray for political leaders to be open to wisdom from sources other than just their own individual determination of what is 'good'.