

I'm going to talk about evil today. There are plenty of places I could start, or indeed people with whom I could start. We can readily think of evils in society: racism, poverty and abuse of the vulnerable, for example. Not that everyone agrees about what is evil: I suspect I would have a difference of opinion with a member of the English Defence League.

But, as you might guess, I'm going to start with today's gospel reading. It's a little further on from last week's gospel, in a section of S. Matthew's gospel which could be called 'Missionary Instructions to Disciples'. Last week we read how Jesus called out the twelve apostles and gave them authority over unclean spirits – putting their calling firmly in the context of opposing evil. It was believed that unclean spirits caused illness.

Turning to today's passage, those who follow Jesus can expect to receive evil at the hands of opponents, just as Jesus is receiving and will receive evil:

If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household.

Jesus is more precise about what might happen near the end of the passage:

Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

So we've come across two senses of the word *evil*. It can apply to suffering in general: illness is an example of this. It can also apply to persecution received because of religious commitment, as Jesus experienced and the church has faced at many times. So have other religions.

What about Beelzebul? The short answer is that it is the name of one of the 'gods of the heathens' who had a following in Israel centuries before Christ. He was a god worshipped in Canaan before the Israelites invaded under Joshua, and his cult attracted Israelites away from worshipping their own God, who'd delivered them from Egypt and given them the Law. The first part of the name is a version of Baal. You may remember the story of Elijah calling down fire from heaven against the prophets of Baal. The word Baal means 'Lord'. It's not certain what the second part of the name, -zebul, means. It may just mean 'prince', so Beelzebul means 'Baal the prince'. People have always speculated about the supernatural world, and by the time of Christ the heathen god had become a senior devil in such speculation within the Jewish tradition. Beelzebul is called 'the prince of demons' later in the gospel. He was sometimes identified with Satan, whose own status and function changed over the centuries within Jewish tradition. Jesus' meaning is clear. He tells his

disciples that if people persecute him on the grounds that he is evil, the disciples can expect similar treatment.

Jesus tells the disciples three times not to fear or be afraid. First, because the truth will out. His goodness will become apparent; it will be revealed that God is the source of his power. That's shown by the resurrection, though that too was disputed by his opponents. Jumping ahead for a moment, the third reason not to fear is that God is aware of everything – sparrows and the hairs on disciples' heads – and by implication will care for them.

The second occurrence of the command not to fear is in a verse which is difficult to understand:

Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

It is possible that Jesus means us to understand it is God who can destroy soul and body in hell. But that sits uncomfortably with the picture of God caring for sparrows and disciples. More likely, Jesus means the devil, who under the name Beelzebul has just been on Jesus' lips.

Our 21st Century ways of thinking are very different from those of the 1st Century. In Jesus' day and culture people thought the world was populated by spirits as well humans, plants and animals. People were at risk of spirit possession. Jesus spoke in the terms of his day, just as the scriptures in general reflect the assumptions of the times in which they were written. There are three questions for us. First, do we take the language literally? Or second, do we regard it as symbolic language, expressing the fact that there are non-human forces of evil capable of influencing the human world? Or third, do we believe that all evil has a human origin?

Not all the things we call evil are caused by the deliberate intent of another party. They are unfortunate facts of life, of living in this world. Some diseases fall into this category: they seem to strike at random. It is the same with some natural disasters. The Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 was not an act of any being's will – unless we believe in a god of the ocean, or a god of earthquakes. It is also true that humanity, living in this world, has the capacity to affect what happens. This is where deliberate intent comes in. We can make progress in medical and health care. We can build in a way that reduces the damage a tsunami causes. Science may enable warnings to be given. Unfortunately human action can make things worse. We live a high carbon lifestyle and the consequence, even though it's not our primary intent, is global warming. We created the conditions which caused the present pandemic, however it started. What matters now is how we respond to evil of the suffering it has caused.

How to respond to evil takes us back to Jesus' teaching. Whatever our views of supernatural beings, Jesus focuses our thinking on two realities: this world and God. In this world we will experience evil for various reasons, but there is a greater reality. Through following Jesus, even to the cross, we can live in God's world. In today's New Testament reading S. Paul writes about our baptisms being a sharing in Christ's death so that we rise in union with him. We die to sin – a conscious decision and a daily task – and we find our true life, our true selves, in his presence.