

Good and Evil

A Sermon preached in the Chapel of the Resurrection, Pusey House, Oxford on Sunday, 13 March 2011 (The First Sunday of Lent, Year A) by Father William Davage, Priest Librarian and Custodian of the Library

“How doth the little crocodile
Improve his shining tail
And pour the waters of the Nile
On every golden shale?
How cheerfully he seems to grin
How neatly spreads his claws
And welcomes little fishes in
With gently trusting jaws”¹

LEWIS Carroll’s use of animal imagery to capture the deceptive and delusive glamour of evil is prefigured in Scripture. In the reading from Genesis this morning Eve is bewitched and enchanted, led astray by the serpent in the Garden: “the serpent beguiled me,”² she says. And elsewhere, we are forcibly reminded that our “adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour.”³ Our theme this morning is Good and Evil and the anthropomorphisation of evil is some indication of how difficult it is to speak of such broad and large and vague principles and themes: good and evil, love and enmity, freedom, liberty all come trippingly off the tongue and engage the theologian and the philosopher and provide the cut-price rhetoric of the political caste but in the realm of mundane experience where most of us live our lives we find it much easier to deal with these concepts and formulations when they are reduced to concrete terms, or metaphor or they are personified and we can engage with them in the actuality and the reality of our lives. For the Christian who believes in the goodness of a creator God, and believes that we are created in the image of God and that we have a propensity for good, we need to account for the existence of evil. And to know what we mean by evil, and what we know by good, we need to think about things and people, people like us.

Our Lord was faced with the reality of evil in his encounter with the Devil in his desert experience. He was tempted by the Devil and he was tempted in specific terms. To satisfy his hunger and thirst, the Devil urged him to turn stones into bread. The Devil showed him all the glories and splendours of the world and said that they would be his if Jesus acknowledged Satan’s authority, power and sway over mankind. And from the very beginning evil was put into specific terms, temptations we can all understand; the eating of the forbidden fruit from the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil”⁴ but the serpent was full of guile and smooth deceit and persuaded Eve. She ate. Adam ate and humanity was fallen: we fell with them.

We are not immune from a share in the Fall of man. A post-lapsarian humanity, although made in the image of and for the purposes of God, has to contend with the realisation that there is an evil that dwells within man and is significant and powerful.

¹ Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

² Genesis 3: 13

³ I Peter 5: 8

⁴ Genesis 3: 9

Sometimes it is of huge proportions and overwhelming, so much so that a moral life is turned upside-down and is so perverted that it creates and inhabits a moral landscape devoid of human sympathy and godly love. As human beings we share in the same human nature which is capable of such moral nihilism. There is a common failure, writ larger in some than in others, but a common failure in humanity. With the rest of humanity we have some share in the burden of guilt and in the capacity and inclination to repeat moral transgressions, to choose the evil rather than the good. "Even if ... we were not accessories to the crime, we are always thanks to our human nature, potential criminals ... we merely lack of suitable opportunity to be drawn into the infernal mêlée." We cannot stand outside humanity, however bleak it is at its worst: we cannot escape the cast of its shadow. We would "do well to possess some 'imagination of evil,' for only the fool can permanently neglect the condition of his [or her] nature ... this negligence is the best means of making himself [or herself] an instrument of evil."⁵

But we fall, again, into abstraction and broad principle and we need the concrete and the personal to make sense of them, to grasp them. As an example, take the opera "Billy Budd" by Benjamin Britten with the libretto by E. M. Forster and Eric Crozier based on the novella by Herman Melville - so much for the credits. For the purposes of this sermon I pass over in silence the undertow in the opera of homo-eroticism. I suspect that is not a word you would expect to hear in a sermon in this place - undertow.

Melville's book and Britten's opera tell the story of a sailor, Billy Budd, who is persecuted by the Master at Arms of H. M. S. Indomitable, John Claggart. Billy refuses to be trapped into joining a mutiny, but he is falsely accused by Claggart to Captain Vere. In trying to defend himself, Billy's stammer hampers him and in his righteous frustration he hits out, strikes Claggart and kills him. He is tried by a drum-head Court Martial, is found guilty, sentenced to death and hanged from the yardarm.

It is a parable of good and evil in conflict; a parable of redemption through suffering and death; a tragedy purified and made transcendental. Budd is the embodiment of innocence and goodness. He is both the pre-lapsarian Adam and he is the Second Adam. He is the sinless victim who suffers as Christ is the Divine Victim who of his own will and volition, suffered and died for the sins of the whole world. After his condemnation Budd lies in the hold as Our Lord spent the night before he was betrayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. As he goes to his execution, Budd forgives Captain Vere, as Our Lord forgave those who condemned him from the Cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."⁶ His hanging from the yardarm, lifted up, echoes the crucifixion, and is made explicit by Melville in a striking, disconcerting image: "... the vapory fleece hanging low in the East was shot through with a soft glory as of the fleece of the Lamb of God seen in a mystical vision ... Billy ascended, and ascending took the full rose of dawn."⁷ Innocence and sinlessness are identical: only the innocent, those who have

⁵ Carl Gustav Jung. "The evil that comes to light in man and that undoubtedly dwells within him is of gigantic proportions. Man has done these things [committed these atrocities]; I am a man, who has his share of human nature, therefore I am guilty with the rest and bear unaltered and indelibly within me the capacity and inclination to do them again at any time. Even ... if we were not accessories to the crimes, we are always thanks to our human nature, potential criminals ... we merely lack of suitable opportunity to be drawn into the infernal mêlée. None of us stands outside humanity's bleak collective shadow and one would therefore do well to possess some 'imagination of evil' for only the fool can permanently neglect the conditions of his nature, In fact, this negligence is the best means of making himself an instrument of evil."

⁶ S. Luke 23 - 24

⁷ Herman Melville, *Billy Budd*

never known the law, can be sinless. Once a man becomes conscious of his actions he becomes a sinner: in S. Paul's words: "Except I had known the law, I had not known sin."⁸

It is the Master at Arms, John Claggart, who personifies evil, the Devil who tempted the Adam of Billy Budd into the knowledge of good and evil.⁹ His principal aria is a chilling Credo that rivals that of Iago in "Otello":

"Would that I lived in my own world ... in the depravity to which I was born. Alas, the light shines in the darkness and the darkness comprehends it and suffers. With hate and envy I am stronger than love. What hope remains if love can escape? If love still lives and grows strong where I cannot enter, what hope is there in my own dark world for me?"¹⁰

He is described by Melville, no less chillingly, as having "no power to annul the elemental evil in him ... apprehending the good but powerless to be it; a nature like Claggart's surcharged with energy as such natures almost invariably are what recourse is left to it but to recoil upon itself and like the scorpion for which the Creator alone is responsible, act out to the end the part allotted to it."¹¹ Here is an evil which cannot exist without goodness, its counterpoint, and its eternal rebuke, and it can only exist if it consumes and destroys that goodness. It is "love constricted, perverted, poisoned."¹² Although Billy Budd is a victim of the impulse of evil, his goodness is so powerful that it threatens, and exists, to consume that evil and it bears out the Christian prescription that when a tyrant dies his rule ends, when a martyr dies his rule begins.

Between these two powerful protagonists stands Edward Fairfax Vere, Captain of the Indomitable, almost, if not quite, Everyman. He introduces a degree of moral complexity as he is caught in a mesh of moral ambivalence and conflict torn, as he is, between duty, sympathy, mercy, justice, law, right and wrong, good and evil. He personifies conflicted humanity. There we are. But that is not where we should be.

If the challenge of evil is to be met, there exists for us the equal challenge not only to do good but to be good, to become Christ-like. This demands not passivity in the face of the dark forces of our nature, or in the face of forces external to us but requires something like what Forster somewhere calls goodness of the aggressive kind. We have that radical task always before us. We are children of God, we are followers of Christ and we are bidden to nothing less than to shine as lights in the world, to overcome the darkness, the darkness resident in the recesses of our psyche, the darkness of the world, the wiles and deceits of the devil. We do that within this community and commonwealth of faith. Through our baptism, confirmation and sacramental unity at the altar we are members of a visible society, the Church Catholic. Our sins will not separate us from the Church, but our membership does not exclude us from the temptations of sin. We can overcome them by our perseverance in the Apostolic faith, our perseverance in our membership of the Church and our commitment to Christ, Christ the Good Shepherd. We know well enough and from painful experience how reliant we are on the goodness and mercy of God and how that mercy trumps the justice that we often deserve. But we must recognize our weaknesses, faults and failures, of our falling short of the glory of God, our propensity for falling into error: and we fall short of the glory of God not necessarily by the deliberate commission of sin. People rarely sin through deliberate, wilful acts of wrongdoing. They sin through error, passion, laxity, lapse, thoughtlessness, foolishness, uninformed

⁸ Romans 7: 7

⁹ W. H. Auden, *The Enchafed Flood*

¹⁰ Libretto *Billy Budd* E. M. Forster and Eric Crozier

¹¹ Herman Melville, *Billy Budd*

¹² E. M. Forster in a letter to Benjamin Britten

conscience, casual disregard for moral precepts. It is not easy to be good. It is too easy to think that we are being good or that we are doing good by the occasional act of charity or a minimum of charitable giving. Being good, doing good is tougher than that.

The existence of evil, however, permits us the exercise of virtue and we draw what virtues we have from the holiness and the goodness of God and, also from the love that overflowed into the world through Jesus Christ. We see in this morning's Gospel how the temptations of the Devil drew those virtues out of Jesus and we need to ensure that we have those virtues so that they can be drawn out of us and, more than that, that we can exercise virtue, charity, and love singly and collectively. We can face the enemy within and the enemy without. We have the resources to confront and defeat physical evil, moral evil, and metaphysical evil. And we need to deploy those resources because it remains tiresomely true that "all that is required for evil to prevail is for good men to do nothing."¹³

This Lenten season allows us, as always, to cultivate, nourish and refresh our virtues by acts of self-denial, self-sacrifice, cleansing our conscience, confessing our sins of omission and commission, scrubbing away those accretions that mar the image of God within us and restrict our capacity to deploy our virtues, to do good and to be good. And we look to see the light of the Easter dawn, to the moment when the Easter Candle is carried into a darkened church and that darkness is dispelled and scattered by the light of Christ and we can see, feel, experience the truth that, "The light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God."¹⁴

¹³ Edmund Burke

¹⁴ S. John 3: 19 – 21