

Lent 1 2019

The Banality of Evil

Feltwell

Readings:

Deut 26:1-11

Rom 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

+ *In Nomine*

In 1960 the notorious Nazi, Adolf Eichmann who orchestrated the mass transportation of millions of Jewish people to the death camps was captured by Israeli agents and brought to Jerusalem. In 1961 he was tried on 15 counts of war crimes, crimes against humanity and crimes against the Jewish people. He was found guilty, sentenced to death and executed the following year.

At this time, the eminent Jewish political philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote a book about Eichmann entitled "The Banality of Evil." She maintained that Eichmann wasn't inherently evil but merely shallow and clueless, a "joiner" who drifted into the Nazi party in search of purpose and direction, not from deep ideological belief. She described him as "neither perverted nor sadistic" but "terrifyingly normal". She concluded that "the sad truth is that the most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be good or evil." This is what Arendt describes as "the banality of evil".

Whilst many psychologists, historians and philosophers disagree with Arendt's assessment of Eichmann, the concept of evil as banal challenges

us on this first Sunday of Lent. If we look up a definition of banal the words ordinary, commonplace, predictable, routine, unimaginative, uninspired, boring and humdrum are just a few of the synonyms offered. So evil, sin is ...boring, unimaginative, routine, predictable even? That's a scary thought as is the thought that many people who do evil deeds are 'terrifyingly normal'.

When we think of evil we tend to think in large scale terms. Terrorists, serial killers, rapists, child abusers, dictators, fraudsters, etc etc. We tend not to think on the smaller scale. And the church through the ages probably didn't help in categorizing sins into Cardinal or Mortal sins such as the 7 deadly sins, pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath and sloth – a list first devised by the Desert Fathers, especially the classically educated 4th century Father Evagrius Ponticus – and venial or lesser sins which injure relationship with God rather than break that relationship completely.

I have to say, I find this categorization of 'sin' to be incredibly unhelpful. In C S Lewis' first Narnia novel, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Edmund is seduced by the white witch with nothing less than a chunk or two of Turkish Delight and a hint of sibling rivalry. Mmmmm – some deadly sin lurking here? Greed, gluttony, envy? Yes indeed, but so cunningly disguised as banal..."Here little boy, have a sweetie..." Just conversation and suggestion but a nugget of evil implanted in Edmund's memory that leads him on to greater potential betrayal.

When we look at this morning's Gospel, we see the banality of evil in action. Jesus is hungry after his long fast. What better than to use his power to 'magic up' some food? No one would blame a hungry man for seeking food. But it's the intention lurking behind the action that's important. How easy it would have been for Jesus to misuse his power for selfish ends. And it's the use and misuse of power that is at the heart of this Gospel. The devil tempts Jesus to misuse His Divine power for worldly gain and riches. And he does it in such a predictable way! Not sure about you but I could be tempted to 'magic up' a tasty meal if I'd been fasting for 40 days! How easy...and who would blame me?

This time last year I mentioned CS Lewis' Screwtape Letters. The devils play on human predictability. We tend to see evil in terms of the 'big picture' stuff paraded before us on the media. We express our shock, revulsion of terrible deeds such as the rape, torture and murder of little Alicia McPhail and sit in our living rooms firmly placing that evil 'out there' and perhaps somewhat smugly thinking what decent chaps we all are by comparison.

But therein lies the trap. The minute we become complacent about our own inherent decency, we open the door to the devil. Not some silly little imp with horns and a pitchfork. No, something far more subtle than that. As our Lent course suggests, what if the main aim of God's great enemy is not to entrap us into spectacular evils, or even into things that we don't recognize as evils at all, but which are simply an absence of good. Its not necessarily the big dramatic sins that cause us the most damage. It's the little things that build up – maybe a sense of discontent with what is

missing from our lives rather than being thankful for the small blessings that often we don't even see because we're simply too focused on the negatives. I know I'm guilty of that one! In the Screwtape Letters, Lewis writes:

It does not matter how small the sins are, provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing.

Nothing is very strong. Nothing leads to the deadliest sin of all...despair. And how easy it is to become entrapped. Because "Me" is powerful, "Me" looks inward, "Me" feels shortchanged by life, "me" feels that "You" owe me... There isn't one of us here this morning who hasn't given way more times than we'd ever like to admit to the power of "Me".

I think there is much truth in what Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote in Gulag Archipeligo:

If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were only necessary to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart.

Repentance is about acknowledging our failure to think about the small things and to change those patterns of behavior which are inwardly focused on self rather than outwardly orientated towards

others. Small things – a smile and kind word rather than a sharp word or cold stare, thinking about how we can help our environment by reducing our dependency on single use plastics, maybe even reducing our consumption of Turkish Delight and putting the extra money towards items for the foodbank. Its those small positives, finding at least one blessing in each day and giving thanks for it, even if everything else is going wrong. In fact I challenge all of you to do that because I can attest first hand out of my very recent experience that it *will* change your lives for the better, as it did for me.

So a Lenten challenge then. Let's all count our blessings daily and in that positive, life affirming act, we will keep the 'Nothingness' and banality of 'Old Nick's' evil at bay. After all who wants to be Mr or Mrs or Ms Boring Banal!