

Salvific Knowledge of Good & Evil

a sermon preached on

The Reign of Christ

Sunday 22 November 2009

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by Fr David Moore

parish priest

Lection: Daniel 7:9-10,13-14, Psalm 93, John 18:33-37

Jesus stands before the supreme political authority in Palestine, the instrument of the supreme authority of the then-known world. He has already been 'tried' by the Jewish religious leaders, who, according to John, desire to execute Jesus but who also want to keep themselves from ritual impurity. ¹ The direction in which this is heading, which the gospel has been hinting at since the outset, must be perfectly clear to Jesus by now. Here is a man staring evil in the face. The murderous machinations of religious and political power must have surely have been openly revealed to him, all the veneer and pretence striped away, exposing pure evil. The four evangelists respond to this calamitous revelation by emphasising different aspects of the Jesus who now sees evil thus unveiled, most pointedly in his final words from the cross. Luke's Jesus forgives those who, wittingly or unwittingly, perpetrate evil. ² Mark's and Matthew's Jesus rails at God's unjust abandonment of him in the face of evil. ³ John's Jesus triumphantly proclaims that this unveiled vision of evil is somehow the accomplishment of the entire work of salvation. ⁴

It is reasonable to assume that staring evil in the face, all disguises utterly removed, could drive a person to sheer madness. Indeed, we know from the experience of modern psychology that this is most certainly the case. And the Scriptures, in their first century Ancient Near East way, also testify to this fact, the 'ubiquity' of 'demon possession' its outward sign. We know from testimony out of the Nazi death camps that seeing pure evil unveiled drove some into utter madness. Yet - and this is the great miracle - we know too that there were others who, faced with evil unveiled, were somehow saved by the demonic vision. The novel *Night* by Elie Wiesel expresses this most movingly, recounting the experience of being forced by the Nazis to watch the long, slow, and soul-destroying hanging death of a small boy. Feeling madness coming on, Wiesel hears a voice in the pitiful crowd call out, "Where is God now?" Then, as if standing on Job's shoulders, he hears another astonishingly declare: "There!" pointing at the dying boy, "There is God!"

How can such a revelation be possible, we might ask. Humanly-speaking we will struggle, of course, to supply a satisfactory rational explanation. But the very point of faith, and of all true religion, is that is not mere rational explanation. And for Christians the supreme manifestation of this great miracle is Jesus, who truly sees evil unveiled. But far from going mad - or as is more common, becoming possessed by that same evil and becoming the perpetrator of yet more evil, falling prey to the cycle of retributive violence ⁵ - Jesus instead now sees reality with total clarity, a clarity which is nothing other than the consciousness of Good and evil. His ancient forebears in the Garden of paradise ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil but were apparently unable to withstand the vision. ⁶ But Jesus represents that development in human consciousness which can now see good and evil without falling prey to either - without dying! ⁷

¹ John 18:31b-32

² Luke 23:34a

³ Mark 15:34b, Matthew 27:46b

⁴ John 19:30

⁵ John 18:11, Mark 26:52, Luke 22:51

⁶ Genesis 2:16-17, 3:1-7

⁷ Genesis 2:17

In short, seeing the reality of good and evil has neither inflated the ego of Jesus, nor has he become possessed by evil's power to accomplish what he might have wanted. This is the kingship which is "not of this world", which cannot be fought for as territory to be captured, persons to be conscripted into the tribal identity, or power-over to be exercised.⁸ Hardly surprising, then, that Jesus, unlike so many of his would-be disciples in the centuries since, simply does not answer the question which ruling power demands answer to: "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own behalf, or did others tell you about me?'"⁹ The vision of the kingdom is impossible for those who are either inflated by the image of themselves as 'good', just as surely to those who fall prey to the temptation to exercise power over others. And just as the vision of the kingdom is impossible under these circumstances, so too it is impossible to embody the kingdom, which is the gospel's proclamation.

Knowledge of good *and* evil which is seduced by neither is the true basis for the claim that Christ "reigns" over all creation. Christendom's perversion of the Scriptural symbols of kingdom and of sovereignty must obviously be wrong, indeed demonic, being rather too mixed up with the institution's repeated claims over territory, literal and human. In any case, John the evangelist writes more than enough about the self-emptying, kenotic, nature of true sovereignty.¹⁰ And the high priest's and Pilate's interrogations amply reveal their absolute opposite. True sovereignty, true "kingship", then, is what is generated in the creation when Jesus sees evil unveiled, without averting the eyes, or blinking even. With such vision Jesus sees in the creation absolute good, and absolute evil, the duality of all reality – that which the tradition calls the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the ecstatic experience of a unity that exists beyond the apparent contradictions of reality.

But such vision in isolation is of little use. This vision must be translated into action. Or as the Rabbis have long taught, faith is a *miqra*, a call to action. Thus, Jesus' vision of the duality of creation, the knowledge of good and evil, to qualify as the salvific act must become embodied. The cross symbolises this supreme embodiment – the *coincidentia oppositorum* which is the workbench of the new creation.

Just so, in the Eucharist, the banquet which embodies the *coincidentia oppositorum* – by the power of the in-dwelling and ubiquitous Spirit, the **Παρακλητος** *Paracletos* who blows where she will – all humankind is called to 'imitate the Christ', to unflinchingly withstand the same open-eyed vision of good and evil, the *coincidentia oppositorum*, which alone is capable of continuing the eternal work of Incarnation.

david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz

⁸ John 18:36

⁹ John 18:33b-34

¹⁰ John 13:4-5,12-16, 34-35