

Discrimination of Good & Evil

a sermon preached on the

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at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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2 Kings 5:1-15, Galatians 6:7-16, Luke 10:1-11,16-20

What is the effect of the mission Jesus gives to the disciple when it is undertaken? "In your name," the disciples excitedly declare, "even the demons submit to us!" "I watched Satan," declares Jesus, "fall from heaven like a flash of lightning."¹ Momentous by any account! What an astonishing power this is, that even the demons submit.

But what was it that caused Satan's fall from heaven? The sequence of events in Luke's story implies that it is directly linked to the disciples' undergoing the mission with which Jesus charges them. This is a grand claim, by any measure. The proclamation of the gospel is indeed a potent force – sufficient even to cause Satan to fall from heaven like lightning.

And yet, dazzled as we might be by this extraordinary show of force, we might not notice the even more astonishing detail: Jesus watched Satan fall... from where? From heaven! Heaven? The inescapable inference is that Satan was in fact in heaven in the first instance. This is a highly problematic thought in the Christian tradition, which was there from the beginning - after all, where on earth did that serpent in the Divinely-created Eden come from?² Our tradition has long wrestled with this problem, which reaches crisis proportions in Job – in which Satan is clearly described as one of the 'sons of God'.³ An adversary, an 'accuser', *Σαταναν Satanan*, is literally one of the sons of God!

There is no satisfactory explanation for this unpleasant fact in the Christian tradition. There have been many attempts, certainly, proof sufficient that it remains something of an embarrassment, and increasingly so, in the dialogue with the world. And by the time we come to the last writing of the Christian canon the stakes have reached cataclysmic proportions – the story ending with not only the destruction of Satan in a lake of fire,⁴ but the Divinely-inspired destruction of the entire created order.⁵ We could dismiss this as mere religious hyperbolae, were it not for the spine-chilling destruction which Christians have been able to justify in the name of advancing the cause of 'Armageddon' – a theme increasingly apparent in cinema, television, and internet games. All this hangs, somewhat like a sword of Damocles, over the Christian tradition.

Against this backdrop, Luke's Jesus merely assures the disciples that when they undergo the same work which he undergoes the powers of good and evil are separated, discriminated. Satan, previously a member of the court of heaven, falls – presumably to earth, into flesh, incarnate. Once indistinguishable from the Divine court, now Satan is visibly separated from it. Consequently, humankind must now deal with the reality of a visible and tangible dark side which was previously concealed in the invisibility and incorporeality of heaven. Jesus' gift to the disciples is the authority which is exercised over the dark side of reality. That is to say, darkness, evil, Satan is a real power, not to be dismissed, nor to be submitted to, but to be clearly identified, discriminated from light, and striven with – as the story of the temptations makes abundantly clear.⁶ Thus, no longer

¹ Luke 10:17,18

² Genesis 3:1

³ Job 1:6

⁴ Revelation 19:20, 20:10

⁵ Revelation 21:1

⁶ Luke 4:1-13

subject to the darkness, no longer under the power of snakes and scorpions, the disciples will be as liberated from the powers of darkness as the crucified one.

All that is necessary for the disciple is the same humility, simplicity and compassion as the crucified one: "Take no bag, no purse, no sandals... offer peace, shalom... cure the sick, announce the presence of the Kingdom. ⁷ This is enough. We may feel we need much more 'equipment', a more advanced 'strategy', better PR. Or we may feel that we need the moral support of hundreds, or thousands, rather than the humble pairs Jesus recommends. ⁸ But it is enough!

Jesus closes with a caution. The disciples are obviously excited about their new-found powers – sufficient to give them joy in fact. ⁹ But Jesus chides them, for this so obvious eruption of spiritual pride - and amnesia. Amnesia, because they have obviously forgotten where the power came from, assuming it was something they said or did. Spiritual pride certainly. "Do not rejoice at this." ¹⁰ Instead of affirming their enthusiastic joy he forbids it! Jesus would almost certainly fail a modern course in leadership, he would never get a job in the burgeoning 'personal trainer' industry or in 'marketing'.

Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you – because it is not you to whom they are submitting for one thing! Moreover, that is the way of inflation and idolatry. Rather, rejoice only that you have your part to play in the discrimination of good and evil – which, in spite of the insoluble puzzle, is mysteriously the writing of heaven. ¹¹

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⁷ Luke 10:4,5,9
⁸ Luke 10:1
⁹ Luke 10:17
¹⁰ Luke 10:20
¹¹ Luke 10:20