

I have been really struggling with the readings which are set down for this week – they are incredibly challenging, even amidst the words of inspiration which are contained within them. They all seem to heed warnings, or record discord or even violence. Why in this set of readings do we get a theme of caution and even suspicion about the nature of evil in our midst?

Evil is not something we often talk about, though we use many other terms which amount to the same thing and I suspect that much of the fear in society is in response to modern perceptions of evil, even if we wouldn't couch it in those terms.

The truth is though, that it is not the obvious dangers – those who promote hatred or violence, or uncalculated risks which present themselves that are the greatest evil we face. Evil is more subtle, like one who comes at night and sows thorns or thistles in the midst of a crop – so the Gospel writer puts it.

Over the last few months I have been watching the TV series dramatization of Margaret Atwood – *The Handmaid's Tale*. It is the story set in the near future, of a totalitarian fundamentalist regime who has overthrown the United States Government and create a society that treats women as property as a response to the environmental and social disasters which have fallen upon their society.

It is a very disturbing piece of drama, and in many ways documents the darker side of humanity. But one of the issues which it raises very clearly is the question of what is evil? And what causes this evil. It also asks questions about how unwittingly we conspire as a society, and often individuals, to solve one problem by creating others, or even letting go of justice.

It is that kind of sales pitch which so many use so well. Where we say yes to a question about a genuine concern and before we know it we have a 2 year subscription to a product we have never heard of, and don't know how to use, but somehow it will solve our problem!

Gilead – the fictitious community in the story -was faced by the huge social and environmental disaster. All crops failed, and no one, human or otherwise was fertile. Things have to change – yes! We need to take back control of our lives and the environment – yes! We need clear guidelines to do this – yes. If we find all who are fertile we can improve our situation – yes! Let's get them together in one place so we know how many we have – yes! The progression of 'yes's seems logical, but in the saying yes the community gradually is led into a situation where all who are fertile become slaves – and there is even a biblical rationale for why this precedent must be adopted.

The reality is of course we don't need to look at fiction for examples of this, though it may be more comfortable! Many of the arguments against the church, or any religion follow the same argument. Hatred, or even the justification for injustice

starts at a logical argument but grows to pollute a whole society or a whole group as the gospel writer puts it. Sometimes it is as simple as not naming something just to keep the peace, which in the end becomes an unworkable and unjust situation.

During the week I was challenged by this head on when I had two meetings. The first involved a conversation with some health professionals about the challenge of providing consistent carers for people who are vulnerable. The reality is, that in an ideal world you would want one consistent super-person to be providing all the care so that the person needing the care has continuity and familiarity. Of course, all of us need time off, time with our families, time to rest and recuperate – even if we are caring for a family member – so it is impossible to provide this situation – or so I thought and hoped.

The second meeting I had was with a carer who is working for a care agency. I was asking about how she communicated with other carers who take over from her when she has days off – when she said ‘I don’t’. I thought I had misheard her, but I hadn’t! Her care agency requires her to work 7 days a week, and some days she is doing 14 hours a day. I was horrified. She is very good at what she does, and very patient – but she cannot sustain this. It is not legal, or right, or just. And yet you can see how very easily, in a sector so poorly resourced and understaffed, that this might happen – especially when we say consistency of care is paramount for those who are vulnerable.

The seeds of evil which come in the night are often not the obvious threats, they are the small drips of fear and information, or even service, which suddenly find us in a place we do not recognise, and in a context we did not envisage. And if we think we will be wiser, or more astute and this will not happen to us – think about meetings you have been to, or decisions you have made, or choices you have made during life. But regardless of the struggles we face, or the small seeds of evil or temptation which may surround us, the readings today also offer a sense of possibility, a sense that even in our most broken, God will not leave us.

The story from Genesis we have followed over the past two weeks captures an element of this, as Jacob running from the anger of his brother after he has stolen his birth right and in many ways his identity – comes to a place where he rests and falls asleep. While he sleeps, he dreams. Jacob is alone, running away from his past and uncertain of what lies before him. And it is here, at his most vulnerable moment, that God speaks to Jacob for the first time: ‘I am the Lord your God’.

“Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you” (Genesis 28:15).

It is a very gracious promise, especially given the circumstances. Jacob has cheated his brother and deceived his father and is now running for his life. Yet God promises to be with Jacob, to keep him from harm, and to bring him back home again¹.

Initially Jacob responds to God's vision with thanksgiving, and by naming it as a holy place – but if we were to read further just a few verses, the next thing that Jacob does is begin to bargain with God. God promise is unconditional, but Jacob – like most of humanity wants to place conditions on it – and the danger of conditions is that as we heard before, they can lead us to a very different outcome!

Jacob is a very complicated character, and this part of his story reflects both the possibility and often the limitation of our humanity.

Jesus is addressing the same complexity in the parable of the wheat and the weeds. While Jesus outlines who each character means to the disciples, we should not interpret it too literally. It is not as simple as those who are evil and those who are not, the seeds of evil, as well as seeds of good, have potential in every human heart at one level, and so there is an element of this parable which is about the need to weed these things out from within ourselves at different points in our lives. But there is another caution we should heed here too – it is not for us to do the weeding of others– this is up to God. God does not see us as evil, or beyond help, or beyond love. 'To rip it out would cause more damage'. Jesus makes clear that we simply cannot be certain who is "in" or who is "out." In fact, God's judgment about these matters will take many by surprise. ²

Paul continues to explore this same question in Romans. The themes in this passage revolve around the nature and definition of the church as the family of God. If people continue to preach a gospel of exclusion, how can the church be countercultural and in what ways can the church express the "righteousness of God," as Jesus challenges disciples in the entire Gospel of Matthew³. As the children of God, the church must exhibit love, kindness, spirituality and holiness in everything it does and the members must strive to live out the life of the Holy Spirit, one that lays out a legacy for others to emulate and follow.

As I said at the start, these are very challenging readings about the nature of the church, and of ourselves. They challenge us to take a hard look at ourselves and our community. But at the same time as we look at the ways that we may be complicit in injustice; we are also reminded that in the end God is with us, prompting us to bring about justice and leading us to a new vision of what the world may be like.

This prompting brings many challenges, including challenges which will call us to speak out about the injustice we can see, and work to ensure that this is a fair

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3355

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=979

³ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3354

society. But we should also remember that this too may not look as might expect!
Amen.