

First Sunday after Trinity, Year B. Sunday 6th June 2021.
Gen 3.8-15; 2 Cor 4.13-5.1; Mark 3.20-35

“He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of demons he casts out demons.”

When William Goulding wrote his famous novel about a group of boys stranded on an island, he chose an intriguing title: *Lord of the Flies*. This was the name that's given at one point in the story to a rotting pig's head set up as an offering to the monster the boys think inhabits the island. As they sink further and further into depravity, this Lord of the Flies becomes a symbol of their descent into feral evil and untamed wickedness.

Why do I mention this? “Lord of the Flies” is in fact a translation of the name of a local Canaanite deity who emerges for the first time in the Second Book of Kings, and his name is *Baal-zebub* - “*Lord of the Flies*.”

This is probably the origin of the local deity or demon mentioned in this morning's gospel – Beelzbul.

So the meaning of our gospel reading might seem quite simple. Jesus is accused of casting out demons in the power of another local demon, an idea he then rejects.

Except that we are called this morning to read this Beelzebul passage in the light of a very different narrative in our first lesson. There in Genesis 3 we read of another demonic presence. Not some local demon, but the presence of original evil, - the primeval sin committed in the Garden of Eden that will have consequences for the whole of creation.

Reading these two passages together causes us to see much more in this mention of Beelzebul than we might have seen otherwise. Beelzebul may only be a tin-pot local demon, but Jesus clearly sees the accusations made about him as pointing to the power of Satan, and as having a universal, cosmic significance.

We see in both stories in different ways, the same reality, sin and evil as a resisting of God's will and his Kingdom.

Sin can reside on the one hand – as represented by Beezebul - in the local, the petty, the personal sins we as individuals commit; yet at the same time, our personal sin is linked to a much more universal sense of the fallenness of all created things such as we read about in Genesis - an evil that seems beyond our control and bewilderingly difficult to resist.

What does this have to say to us and how we live our lives? Jesus' point, it strikes me, is very straightforward. Those who want to follow him have to make a choice: to reject Satan and turn to Christ.

I think on an individual level this boils down to what used to be called in a slightly old fashioned sort of spirituality “taking sin seriously.” If we want to be serious about our relationship with God, then a crucial part of that must be things like the frequent examination of conscience, being honest when we've got things wrong, use of the sacrament of confession, or the advice of a spiritual director. If we are to communicate the gospel to others, we need to be alive ourselves with the frequent joy of knowing we are reconciled to God and that our sins are forgiven.

But how we resist sin and evil is also an important part of the way in which the wider culture around us is formed.

Perhaps we might return to William Goulding to show what I mean. One of the important ideas he explores in *Lord of the Flies* is the relationship between individual responsibility and groupthink. He reveals what happens when individuals abrogate their personal responsibility, with the gradual descent into a tyranny that somehow feels more evil and more organised than the simple sum of its parts.

Our individual decisions and choices affect the wider culture we live in. Christ calls us to do good not just for its own worth, but because it will influence and affect those around us. If we live more unselfishly, our culture can become more generous. If we are more forgiving, our society will become more compassionate. The things we value will become the things others begin to value too.

We see in our readings today a pointer to an important character of the Christian life – turning to Christ and away from Satan and sin. By resisting Satan’s charms, and constantly bringing our own failings to the Lord in repentance, we can have a good hope that if ever a Kingdom and a House is ready for falling, it is Satan’s: for he is the strong man whom Christ binds through his death and overcomes through his Resurrection.