

14TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

a sermon preached by Fr. John-Francis Friendship SCP
at S. Andrew's Church, Romford
Sunday, July 3rd, 2011

Zech. 9: 9-12

Prophesy that Jerusalem's king comes riding on a donkey to bring peace.

Roms.7: 15-25a

I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do

Matt.11: 16-19, 25-30 *Being blind to the truth – hidden from the wise and revealed to children.*

INTRODUCTION

'It was the snake what made me do it!'

So said Eve, or something like it, when, confronted with the question, "Who's to blame?" in that long-lost paradise of Eden. But not before Adam had put the blame on her did Eve accuse the serpent of whispering in her ear, *'Eat it – it's goooooood for you!'* And that golden fruit *did* look so innocent and delicious. Who could resist, especially when that little voice is saying, 'Go on, it won't do any harm.' That, of course, is the mythical account of how sin entered the world and, we're told, was the result of not listening to the voice of God.

THE PROBLEM OF SIN

'So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand' wrote St. Paul in what was, clearly, a heart-felt piece of self-reflection. How often we find ourselves doing the very thing we know, in our heart-of-hearts, we shouldn't. His words speak across the centuries: *'I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.'* How often have we known what we want to do, should do or even aspire to do?

And Paul writes for all when he says *'I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.'*

It's as if we all have an angel on one shoulder whispering words of delight in one ear, and then one on the other whispering words of temptation. We know we've had enough chocolate ... but *just one more can't hurt....* Whether its chocolate or infidelity our 'fall' begins with that little voice saying, *go on, it won't hurt...* So, why do we listen to that voice? What drives us to make bad choices? Why, at times, do we find it so hard to say 'no'? I suppose both religion and psychiatry try to deal with those questions.

There is a strand in Christianity which says that we are corrupt – evil – and will always incline towards the darker side, towards evil. Those who adopt this understanding will point to the Fall, to that moment when Eve was seduced by the serpent, and say that sin took control of humanity at that point and the only those who turn to Christ can avoid its consequences. Whilst aspects of this understanding have much to offer there is a danger of over-simplification and such a simple reading of the text can lead to avoiding both personal responsibility for our actions – 'it was the devil that made me do it'. People can easily avoid looking at their own motives by having a scapegoat to blame. And, like many, I have a real sense of difficulty over the notion that we are essentially corrupt. But there is another way of understanding the story which avoids the 'blame game' and the teaching that, at heart, we are evil.

SIN AND THE COMMANDMENTS

St. Paul clearly didn't blame others for his actions – he just recognised that there is a *tendency* to 'sin' which lies in all of us. A tendency to choose what isn't going to lead us to life in all its fullness. Sin, in his understanding, is that which leads us away from God. And God, for Paul, was the source of life. Sin breaks that relationship and leads actions which the 10 great Commandments sought to guard against – You shall not Kill, You shall honour your mother and father and so on.

There was a moment when Jesus was confronted by a teacher of the Jewish Law who asked him which was the greatest and Jesus gave that answer which remains critical to understanding our faith: *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."* (Matt. 22: 37-39)

Here is a way to re-balance relationships rooted in love. Love for God, others and self.

THE COMMAND TO LOVE

Now many would argue that one of the reasons we do the things we know are not good for us, or others, is because we do not properly love ourselves. We do not value ourselves sufficiently nor place a proper emphasis on our own needs. So much sin is, in fact, misplaced love. We hurt ourselves by our own actions because we do not love ourselves as we are loved by God. And, if we don't value ourselves, we won't be able to value others. How right it is to set as a Commandment, *'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'*

All these commandments are dependent on being in a place of freedom so that we are not driven by an array of desires at war within us. In order to love we must have that overriding desire within us. It has to be the guiding principle, if you like, that determines our actions. In a phrase I find myself often using, our heart needs to be 'inclined towards God'. Now that doesn't mean that we are to be 'holier than thou'. Rather it means that the centre of our being needs to be orientated towards that which draws us to life. We need to find and centre ourselves in that place of inner freedom whereby we are drawn towards the light.

DISCERNING WHICH VOICES TO HEED

Now, at this point, some of you may be wondering about these angels and devils: you may have noticed they are almost indistinguishable. Neither looks very bad, very evil. And that is the problem. How do we tell which voice to listen to? It may be easy when we're dealing with the 'big sins', but how can we be so sure if the choice we have to make isn't so clear-cut? It has been said that evil can masquerade as good – which is why these two don't seem so different. It's one thing to have to decide whether or not to have another chocolate, but what happens when things are more complex?

I have sometimes mentioned the value of having a Spiritual Director, someone whom we talk with from time to time who can help us sift through life and keep us walking in the right direction. Sometimes, when we're in the middle of things, it's difficult to understand what's going on, to know how best to respond. We can easily get stuck. How can we find that place of inner freedom again? Friends might help, but often we need an independent, discerning ear who can listen to us and help us look at our lives in a different way. A Spiritual Director complements the role of a Confessor who is the sacramental presence of our liberating and forgiving God.

Some people are concerned at the title – Spiritual Director. They think that it must mean someone is going to tell them how to live their lives. But that is far from the roll of a Director who is there to listen, observe and reflect back and, hopefully, from their place of inner freedom, to

help someone look at their life in a different way. They are there to help someone explore the direction of the Spirit in their lives. Certainly the role of a Director can be of great help when it comes to these moments when choices have to be made. How can I know the right path to take? In times such as these a Director can be invaluable.

CONCLUSION

In the end our Faith has one vital lesson to teach us. We need to turn our face to God. To develop the heart-space so that it is free enough to respond to God. To listen to those words of Jesus, *"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."* (Matt. 11:28) AND DO JUST THAT!

Jesus isn't the answer to all life's problems, but, together with Him, we can find the way that will lead us to life in all its fullness.

Amen.