

Year A
First Sunday of Lent
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7
Romans 5:12-19
Matthew 4:1-11

We don't talk about Bruno. Those of you with younger members of your families may be familiar with the animated film, Encanto, a story of a magical family where every child is given a gift when they come of age; all apart from Mirabelle, when her turn comes nothing happens, leading her on a journey that includes the hidden stories of Bruno, her uncle, who disappeared, and who dwells in the dark memories of the family as misusing his gift. We don't talk about Bruno is the family mantra, "when he calls your name it all fades to black, when he sees your dreams and feasts on your screams." Bruno haunts the story from the sidelines.

It is a bit like that with the devil in modern Christian theology and spirituality. There is a vague awareness of something, but we don't go too far into it. Until we get a reading where he rocks up front and centre, of course he would, this is the beginning of Lent, time for us to talk plainly about each of us wrestling with the devil in our own temptations, how the next 40 odd days will be our own wilderness experience.

Well, yes and no. Our gospel story isn't really about any of that, it is more about identity, it is less the Temptation of Jesus and more the Testing of God's

Son¹. Jesus having been baptised takes a sudden detour, having been declared the Son of God at his baptism, Matthew now has Jesus understand what that identity means before the mission begins. Mark hasn't got time for it, he covers it in one verse, John moves it to the end of Jesus' ministry in Gethsemane, but Matthew and Luke place it here before the ministry proper happens. And even here in the hot desert, we're not going to talk about the devil much.

I got told off last week for not properly explaining the Transfiguration, how on earth were Moses and Elijah on the mountain with Jesus? Well, we'll look at the Transfiguration again in August and next year, so I'll fix it then! But we have a similar question this morning, what is going on here, is this a literal story, is the devil really there, horns and tail and polished trident?

Much like everything that has come before in Matthew, this is more a theological passage than a literal one. Matthew wants us to see Jesus battling with the question of his identity and winning, it is the Holy Spirit that leads Jesus into the desert, in Mark the Spirit drives Jesus into the desert. This is necessary, holy work, that God's Son must undergo before the necessary, holy

¹ Daniel Harrington, *Gospel of Matthew*, p.68

work of the ministry and passion. The question is are we supposed to see Jesus as the new Israel or the new Adam?

All the questions used, and Jesus' responses here are from the book Deuteronomy, a summing up of the Law, an indication that we are being brought back to the Law, to the failure of Israel to understand their identity as God's people and hence their 40-year wandering. That fits Matthew's theme perfectly, a new Moses, a new Law, here even a new Israel.

But it is much more likely that Matthew wants us to see Jesus as the new Adam. In parallel with the second creation account, that we heard earlier, God declares the identity of Adam and Eve and their limitations. The devil shows up to question what God has said, and in a series of 3 challenges entices Adam and Eve to sin, to deny their identity. The medieval monk and scholar Aelfric of Eynsham sees the temptations of Adam and Eve as gluttony, vainglory or pride, and greed. In the same way, for Aelfric, the devil comes to Jesus at the end of his desert experience and challenges his identity in the same three ways.²

Where Adam failed, Jesus wins, and where Jesus wins, we win. "Jesus is shown

² Derek A Olsen, *Reading Matthew with Monks*, p.134

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to us here as the perfected human creature Adam was to be but never became.”³ He is not simply the antitype of Adam, succeeding where Adam fails, but Jesus’ replaying of the temptations of Adam are fundamentally redemptive.⁴ That’s Paul’s convoluted point in the reading from Romans, what Jesus achieves in the desert we are all a part of.

If you didn’t quite make it to Ash Wednesday finding yourself in the desert blinking in the glare of the sun and the dry heat enveloping you this morning might be a bit of a shock! For those of us who were here and have the memory of the ash cross this is where we knew we would begin, remembering that we are dust as we are led into the desert of repentance. Jesus’ forty days and forty nights have become our exemplar for our own Lenten journeys. The story isn’t about the devil, it is about Jesus, like everything that has gone before in Matthew’s Gospel this is Christology, who is Jesus, who is God’s Son?

What do we do then with the devil here in this story? Matthew is making it personal, one on one, and using the Jewish tradition of the Satan, the accuser, the one who tests, a theological reflection and meditation rather than an

³ Mark Barrett, *The Wind, The Fountain and The fire*, p.61

⁴ Olsen, p.149

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historical event. We don't need a devil to know there is evil. We see it every day: from the web of lies and deceptions that lead the rich and the powerful back to one billionaire financier, who promised them wealth, access, power, privilege and perverse and abusive pleasure (gluttony, pride and greed); we see it in the ongoing systematic targeting and bombarding of a race and a people through atrocious war crimes and illegal settlement building; we see it in a Christian Nationalism that puts a man (and it usually is a man) or a flag or a country or an ideal ahead of Jesus Christ; we see it in dehumanising rhetoric that refuses to acknowledge the common human identity of those who are different from us; we see it in the media obsession with downfall and karma rather than justice; we see it in the way that you and I doomscroll, waiting for the next fall of the mighty, hoping for drama rather than redemption. We see it in the way you and I deceive ourselves, in the small ways and big ways, in the ways that we diminish ourselves and others, in the ways in which we harm God's good creation. No, we don't need a devil, we do a good enough job of our own.

It is only when we return to the question of our identity that we can begin to be liberated from our delusions. Lent is the time for us to retreat from the frontline of our lives to sift who we have become. A time to have our hands

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freed, a time to pick away at the accumulations of doubts, deceits and desires that obscure who we really are. A time to lay aside our uncritical busyness and pay attention to who we are and whose we are. It is a time to return to the fundamental question of our identity. Who are you? When everything else is stripped away, when the roles of husband/wife, partner/lover, father/mother, son/daughter, worker/volunteer, old/young, are all stripped away and you are left with you, who are you?

That's why it is easier to doomscroll and to watch the unmasking of the powerful and the elite, it stops us doing the same. But Lent doesn't afford us those luxuries. The whole point of whatever Lenten observance you have chosen or are yet to choose is that it unmask us, it asks us to face up honestly to what or who we have placed central in our lives, like Adam and Eve, like the offer of the Satan to Jesus, you don't need God, have this instead.

At the end of Encanto, spoiler alert, we discover that Bruno has been there all along, that the myths and memories that gathered around him came out of fear and confusion more than truth. Bruno, like every other member of the family, has his own gift that he has to learn to use for others. As does Mirabelle, but her gift requires the dismantling of the family's myth of perfection and allows

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the cracks to show who they really are in order to discover who they can be, “the stars don’t shine, they burn and constellations swirl,” she sings in the finale.

You and I are invited to the necessary holy work of Lent so that we don’t just shine but burn, not just for ourselves, but for the Church and the world.

Because when we confront our own identity and rediscover who we are in Christ we can rediscover the Church’s identity together, we learn to be God’s people once again, we can reframe the world. But it starts with you and it starts with me. It starts here in the desert of repentance, not alone but with Christ, God’s Son, who has already won. Lent is the time when we do talk, about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.