

**Genesis 28.10-19a, Romans 8.12-25, Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43**

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All our readings this morning have something to do with the connection between earth and heaven, and also with things that stop us getting to heaven.

First we heard the story of Jacob and his dream of a ladder connecting heaven and earth. The context here is that Jacob is on the road, because he has just cheated his brother out of his inheritance – and been thrown out of the house. (It was his mother's idea, actually, but Jacob seems to go along with it enthusiastically.) The dream is God's way of re-establishing contact with him and saying, you did wrong, but I am still with you and you will be all right in the end.

Our New Testament reading goes a step further. St Paul celebrates the fact that, after the resurrection, the Spirit of God has come onto and into the followers of Jesus, so that they have become a connection between heaven and earth, they can do God's work in the world, and eventually they will come to glory.

Then in our gospel reading, Jesus tells a parable about how God plants the seeds of God's kingdom among us and invites us to help them grow, and everyone who does that will enter the kingdom of heaven at the end time. Meanwhile, however, the devil is planting evil in the world, and the good and evil will not be separated until judgment day.

So these passages have three slightly different ways of thinking about God's relationship with the world. God oversees us, or works in us, or works among us. Or, Christians would say, all three. But today's readings also have three different visions of how evil works in the world.

Jacob has free will, and he chose to do wrong. For Matthew, God and the devil compete to sow good and evil in the world, and we have to pick a side. For Paul, humanity may have chosen to do wrong in the past, but now we are trapped by the consequences of our past, and we can't get out without God's help.

Today, it's this negative side I'd like to think about a bit more. Because we don't always notice how many ways there are of thinking about evil and wrongdoing (or sin), in the Bible and the world around us. And maybe we don't talk about them as much as we should.

In the Old Testament, one way of thinking about evil dominates strongly: people have free will, they choose how they behave, and they have to take the consequences.<sup>1</sup> But not long before Jesus was born, another idea developed in Judaism. There is a supernatural power – who has many names, but often the devil or Satan – who is working against God, and people are targeted and led astray by him, and it is not entirely their fault. The New Testament picks up both these ideas, and Paul adds the refinement that, once, sin was our fault, but now the consequences of past actions have so much power over us that we are slaves to the devil, or sin, and we can't get out except by God's grace.

But there's more, because Jewish and Christian traditions are only part of our culture now. And perhaps the ideas that have most influence now, come from psychology, which sees multiple factors playing a part in the way people think and act, for good or bad: the situation we grow up in; the people around us; other people's view of us and how we respond to it; choices or experiments we make that we then get stuck in. For instance, the psychologist Ervin Staub, who is interested in the psychology of good and evil, suggests that 'human beings have certain shared psychological needs that must be fulfilled if we are to lead reasonably satisfying lives: We need to feel secure ... to develop a positive identity ... to feel effective and to have reasonable control

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<sup>1</sup> Very occasionally (as at Gen 6.5, before Noah's Flood) God decides that humanity is simply bad – but that idea is exceedingly rare. In addition, the prophets sometimes adumbrate Paul's idea that sin traps us and is handed down generations, but the assumption of free will dominates the Hebrew Bible.

over what is essential to us; we need both deep connections to other people and ... independence; we need to understand the world and our place in it....<sup>2</sup>

When we don't have those things, then what he calls 'evil' can grow in us, and we can get stuck in it and struggle to get out even if we want to. This seems to me to be a view of evil which is both compassionate and constructive, and quite closely related to St Paul except that it avoids mentioning God.<sup>3</sup>

But here is the snag with all these ideas about evil and wrongdoing. There are now so many ideas in play, in our world, about where evil comes from, and how it affects us, and what we can do about it, that whenever we feel that we are not thinking or acting as well as we could do, we can nearly always find some view of evil that lets us off the hook.

For instance, I feel bad about the amount of flying I do. I know it's bad for the environment – I don't want to damage the planet – but I do it. Is the devil tempting me to fly? I don't honestly think so. Am I doing it out of free will? If I am, I'm really to blame. So maybe I'm not! It is part of my job; so maybe it's the job's fault. And many people do it. So maybe it's society's fault.

I could go on, finding some reason why my behaviour is not really my fault, so I'm off the hook.

I suspect we often think this way these days, and for Christians it is not good religion. So what can we do?

For a start, I think all our ideas about evil are potentially helpful. When we do wrong, sometimes it is really our choice. Sometimes it is a bad pattern we have got into. Sometimes it is a lot to do with our upbringing, or wider society. But instead of using all our ideas about evil and wrongdoing to let ourselves off the hook, we might use them to explore the situation when we do wrong, and think which idea fits each situation, and then tackle it appropriately. So I need to think harder about why I really do fly so much, and probably the answer is that sometimes it is a choice, so I can choose to do better. Sometimes it is down to my job, so I can lobby my colleagues, say, for fewer international meetings. And so on.

What is more, in this process we can also make use of the three slightly ways of thinking about God's relationship with the world, which I mentioned at the start: God oversees Jacob – God works among us, in Matthew – and God works in us, in Paul.

God oversees us, and we have God's commandments to guide us. For instance, we are commanded to love our neighbour, so we must seriously try not to do things that harm our neighbour. God works among us, so we can line up with God against evil, and go where God leads us. And God works in us, in the Spirit, so we can call on all the gifts and the fruit of the Spirit that Paul describes (e.g. 1 Cor 12.4–11 Gal 5.22) and exercise them for good. And maybe we sometimes make use of God's gifts to the medical profession and get some therapy.

We have a lot of resources when it comes to combating evil, but we need to use them to help us, not to let ourselves off the hook. Remembering, as God said to Jacob, that God is still with us, and promises that, with God, it will be all right in the end. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Ervin Staub, "The Roots of Good and Evil: Social Conditions, Culture, Personality, and Basic Human Needs," *Personality and Psychology Review* 3.3 (1999), 179–192.

<sup>3</sup> Staub also offers an origin story for the idea of metaphysical evil, which is not unlike Paul's. Because those who do wrong, more or less intentionally, because wrong has been done to them or they have been brought up in a situation where wrongdoing is normal, can feel so trapped, psychologically and materially, in a world of wrongdoing that it is as if an external power had trapped them there. The consequences of this experience are far-reaching. If one feels stuck in a world, good or bad, that world becomes the norm. It is normal to rely on other people who belong to it, and harder to reach out, respond to, or trust anyone from beyond it. That world becomes the only one that matters.