

Sermon

19th November 2023

Get behind me Satan

To you I lift up my eyes,

O you who are enthroned in the heavens!

As the eyes of servants

look to the hand of their master,

as the eyes of a maid

to the hand of her mistress,

so our eyes look to the Lord our God,

until he has mercy upon us.

Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us,

for we have had more than enough of contempt.

Our soul has had more than its fill

of the scorn of those who are at ease,

of the contempt of the proud.

In the Gospel of Matthew, a few chapters earlier than today's gospel, we read that when Jesus came into the district of Caesaria Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but other Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?'" Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hades will not prevail against it.'

‘From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.’ But Jesus turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.

Jesus’ rebuke of Peter is as revealing as it is stinging.

In Jesus’ day, the people had fallen into temptation, in the form of a false and foolish hope, of their economic and political liberation, from their oppression under an evil empire. Which meant that the Christ, when he came, not in fulfilment of their particular political self-interest, but to return them to God, and reconcile them back to God in his death, the ancient Jewish people missed out on their reconciliation with God. As, too, the gentile world then, and much more deeply, secularised humanity today, including secularised Christianity.

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, the Apostle said. All stand in need of forgiveness from God, of reconciliation with God, at the hands of the crucified Christ, the Messiah of God.

Because of their false understanding of Jesus’ identity as the Messiah, the distortion of Jesus true identity, by the evil one, the enemy of human nature, Jesus first had to cleanse the disciples understanding of him, before he could accept the title of Messiah - the Christ – before he died, once for all people, on the cross.

After all, already the early church understood the Pax Romana, the peace of Rome, as an earthly expression of the heavenly reign of Jesus Christ. The unification and pacification of the once divided and warring world around the

Mediterranean Sea under Emperor Augustus, part of God's Preservation of the world. Social peace, was part of Christ's heavenly reign of peace over the world.

In the Gospel, Jesus reveals the cosmic power of evil at work behind today's so-called movements of political liberation.

Wolfhart Pannenberg was the world's leading post-war Christian theologian. Writing in 1981 Pannenberg said, I am very 'confident ..about the future of religion – not a future in relation to [the idea of] economic and/or political liberation. Much of the enthusiasm in such movements seems to me an unintentional contribution to accelerating the spread of oppressive regimes. But religion in the strict sense of the word can feel more secure today than it has for a long time. It will outlive every ideological regime.' It will outlive the secular ideology, which is badly in need of religious support in our day.

Today, we see the same power of evil at work behind the fallen humanity in the Middle East. In Hamas, in Iran, in all who seek political liberation from the evil of Israel, and of America. Hamas' leader, Khaled Mashal, when, in discussing 'freedom' for Palestine, said, frighteningly 'nations are not easily liberated...the Russians sacrificed 30 million people in WWII to be free from Hitler's attack.' In Iran, its master, the political 'liberation' of the Palestinian people, from the evil of Israel and America, the Great Satan, means the willingness to sacrifice, 10 million Jewish lives, and as many Palestinian lives, for their cause: the ethnic cleansing of the Jewish people from the Middle East, through jihad, if necessary, from the Jordan river to the Mediterranean sea.

'Antichrist is not just an individual figure,' Pannenberg writes. 'The bible refers to many such figures. At issue, is a type of the seducer who woos away from the true Messiah. Early Christianity saw a link here to false teachers. But in a

special way the type of antichrist finds manifestation in the alternative doctrines of liberation to which we are exposed in our modern societies.

Jesus said ‘The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. But I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly’.

Jesus concludes his sermon, ‘If any want to become my disciples, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.’

Amen.