

Sermon on Matthew 4: 1-11
Sight and Sound Awake

I am a very deep sleeper.

Once the light goes out and my head hits the pillow, I'm out.

Much can be going on around me, noise, storms, sirens, and I won't wake up, even babies crying, though I think Lucy thinks this last one is a ruse.

I sleep on through, none the wiser most of the time.

One thing though I simply can't sleep through is the sound of a mosquito buzzing in my ear.

This is surely what evil sounds like: the incessant whine of a mosquito during the night.

I can't sleep through it.

I wake up, turn on the light, and have been known to sit for up to an hour waiting for my opportunity to swat it.

It may take many tries and quite a bit of patience, but I won't go back to sleep until it's gone. Indeed I can't.

It's not just the whine in my ear, of course, it's the knowledge that in trying to go back to sleep and ignore it, I might very well wake up in the morning having been bitten.

With little red potch marks all over my face. That's bad news.

So there are floods of relief when the wretched pest is gone.

That's about the best feeling in the world I think.

And sleep is very easy to get back to knowing that the threat has been faced and dismissed.

The thing is though, there is a great temptation when I am first wakened and in that fuzzy half asleep state, by that foreboding insect whine to roll over and try and go back to sleep.

To ignore it.

To leave the light off and hope for the best.

To stay in the warm comfort of bed and imagine I will reach the morning unaffected.

Rowan Williams once wrote, 'I suspect that it is more religiously imperative to be worried by evil than to put it into a satisfactory theoretical context...'.¹

He is surely right.

As we hear the story of Jesus' temptations on this first Sunday in Lent, our primary concern ought not to be, what does this tell us about the nature of evil, but that evil exists and is a potent force and how might we stare it down.

It was enacted against Jesus in the form of these three temptations, and it is waging war still in our world today. We better be on guard.

We better wake up lest the mosquito bite us while we are asleep.

And we end up with red marks all over us.

In the last couple of centuries it was believed that evil was becoming more and more an irrelevancy.

The great modern god called Progress was going to stamp it out.

Progress, it was believed, would eventually mean that we moved past evil as a species.

We would become so enlightened in our thinking and technology that we would make it impossible, conquer it, and live free and happy lives as a result.

We've been asleep.

Any number of events in the 20th century proved this theory to be the exercise in fanciful thinking it always was.

The god called Progress was brutally put down in the gas chambers of Auschwitz and the gulags of Siberia (among other places).

Indeed we came to see that our progress only gave evil bigger and better tools, more efficiencies, greater scope.

¹ Rowan Williams, 'Redeeming Sorrows: Marilyn McCord Adams and the defeat of evil', in Mike Higton (ed), 2007; *Wrestling With Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI. p272.

Our thinking evil could be overcome by progress was itself a conduit for greater evil to endure.

It was part of the larger problem.

Evil remains with us today in any number of forms. And we ought to be worried.

Right from the beginning, the Judeo-Christian story is in no doubt about the presence of evil.

When Jesus comes face to face with the devil in the wilderness, he is going where Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel, and Saul, and David, and many others have gone before him.

He is going, indeed, into the wilderness, harking back to the people of Israel themselves wandering in the desert for 40 years and being tested with any number of false paths.

He has just been baptised and affirmed by the divine voice, 'This is my Son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased.' And with his hair still wet, the Spirit drives him out into the desert to face the accuser.

But there's a delay. First there is a 40 day interval.

He will not face the ferocity of evil when he is strong and glowing radiantly from the heavenly affirmation of his divine Sonship.

No, he will be brought to his lowest ebb, his weakest point.

And then the devil will say seductively, 'Well, if you are the Son of God, turn these stones to bread, throw yourself off this Temple, bow down and worship me.'

Seductive, because it is a distortion of an eternal truth – that Jesus is the Son of God.

The devil comes at Jesus slantways.

He doesn't outrightly oppose him, he whispers in his ear, "you don't need to be awake, go to sleep, this is what it really means to be Son of God, you can be comfortable with a little bread, a little magic, a little earthly power; the mosquito won't bite you. You'll be fine, these are the currencies of our world my friend. This is what real power looks like."

And for a hungry, weakened, solitary, wanderer, this must have sounded pretty alluring.

The temptations are not based on an alternative identity for Jesus, but as an alternative understanding of Jesus' true identity.

And all of it is based on one underlying premise which is revealed in the Devil's final words – if only you'll bow down and worship me.

Evil's greatest trick is to get us to believe we must worship something other than God, as God.

We see that even Holy Scripture itself can be bent into becoming a tool for this malign purpose.

Despite his weakened state, though, Jesus is fully awake.

Fully awake to who he is, what he has been sent for, and the seductive tricks of evil.

The whining mosquito in his ear is about to be put down.

And in his resistance we see not only the true nature of his Messiahship, of his identity as the Son of God, but the way evil is stripped of its power.

Each of Jesus' replies point to the service and worship of the one true God.

And the nature of God is not about earthly displays of power or magic shows, but a life filled with the divine love and characterised by the Father's own self giving.

The testing of Jesus and his refusal to go over to Satan's schemes sets the scene for all of the story to come.

The wilderness of this experience for Jesus, bringing with it the echoes of Israel's most dire crisis, anticipates the wilderness of the cross.

And you might recall that in Matthew's telling, a very familiar question is heard at that crisis point too.

Passers by, we're told were hurling insults at him, and saying, 'Save yourself, come down from there, if you are the Son of God.'

Jesus status as Son of God is tested from beginning to end.

And at each point the test revolves around casting his divine Sonship in a different light, indeed a distorted light which would allow something other than walking in God's way to unfold.

Jesus resists at the cross as he resisted in the wilderness to show who he is, and who God is, for our sake.

The church has lived off his refusals now for 2 millennia.

For us to resist evil, we must live by Jesus' strength, not our own.

On our own we will fail to resist evil.

We will stay asleep, roll over, and find ourselves bitten in the morning.

Cling to Jesus who at every point resisted and there is hope.

You may notice how in this relatively short passage three different titles are given to the face of evil, meaning in turn, the tester, the accuser and the adversary.

The final one, the adversary, Satan, is the same word Jesus uses when Peter tries to tell him he wouldn't suffer and die.

Get behind be Satan.

Jesus' death is the greatest sign of who he is and who God is.

It is the sign par excellence of the divine power of powerlessness and it is the action that evil can't comprehend and can't do away with.

So anything that tries to drag him or us away from that way of powerlessness we know is not of God.

Evil is subtle and surreptitious in this respect, more often found in seemingly innocent or small things without apparently much consequence.

Newspapers like to brand people 'evil' because it sells copies, because it gives us someone to hate, someone to project all our hurts and anger towards, but in fact this is just another way we're driven apart.

Another tool of the evil the papers are purporting to confront.

Most of the time our resistance of evil will come in seemingly smaller ways.

When we refuse to join in unkind gossip.

When we quietly love someone who is on the outer.

When we tell the truth even when the lie would be far easier and less troublesome.

When we forgive little hurts and large, thereby stripping them of their power.

Testing, like the mosquito in the ear, wakes us out of our slumber and reminds us that the comfortable way may well not be the faithful way.

It's far easier to be sight and sound asleep than to wake up, alert, and mindful of the pressure points of evil in our lives and in the world.

When we do this, though, when we choose the powerless love of God over the grasping of power, even if it means discomfort, hours awake in the middle of the night searching our souls, we show ourselves faithful to the one who has been faithful to us.

Testing steels us to a deeper discipleship, it wakes us up, it shatters our illusions and confronts us with the question of whose way we choose.

I had an old minister friend years ago who told me a difficult story.

He had been asked once to take the funeral service of a convicted murderer.

It had to be kept very quiet as there would likely be protests if it became public news and obviously in any number of other ways it was an incredibly delicate and difficult situation.

He wrestled long and hard about whether he should do it, but in the end agreed.

He took the service with only a couple of people present at the grave and made the sign of the cross over the body. That's all he told me.

He made no other explanation, just those bare facts.

It was like the silence at the end of his speaking was all else that needed to be said as anything else was too difficult.

But as I reflected on it, it seemed to me more and more that that was his way of resisting the temptation to write a person off whom society had written off long before.

That was his way of saying it will not be this evil you have done which has the final word here.

While there is much we don't know, I will affirm God's love, even for murderers.

It's subtle see.

The easy thing would have been to refuse and condemn as all others had.

And where would that have gotten anyone?

Just another worthless criminal, unremembered except for the evil monster he was? No.

As difficult as it was to say the words, he stood over the grave and whispered what Christians affirm at every funeral – in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

He was affirming a belief that no-one is ever lost to God and that even the greatest evil can be overcome.

He was fully awake.

And on that day it was Jesus, not the Devil who had the last word.

Sight and sound asleep?

I hope not.

I hope by faith as we walk into Lent we are fully awake.

Fully prepared, fully alert.

Our Lord has been there before us, tempted in every way as we are, and so we can take strength from his example and our abiding in him at all times.

Just as in his resisting the Devil's schemes we see who he truly is, so as we resist we become more and more who we are truly made to be.

Disciples of the one who lays down his life that we should have life, and that in abundance.

Evil is strong, there is no question; but in becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross, our Lord is stronger.

That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Amen.