

ON WATCHING SATAN FALL¹

**A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh in St James' Church,
King Street, Sydney, on the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, 7 July 2013**

This morning's gospel is deceptively simple. Jesus sends out seventy of his disciples, telling them how to behave while on their mission. They come back, telling him how well they have gone. The instructions given by Jesus appear to be the way in which the missionaries of the early church went about their business. They were to go out in twos, stay in local homes and depart if they received no response. So, at this level, the story is a relatively straightforward narrative, illustrative of both what Jesus did and how his directions influenced his followers. It is a story based on good intentions, gentle persuasion and subsequent positive results.

If we were as alert to the significance of numbers as the original readers, we might have understood the significance of the number seventy and have been more attentive to what follows. Matthew uses the number twelve, the number of the tribes of Israel. Luke uses seventy, the number of the Israelites who originally went into Egypt² and elders who accompanied Moses when he received the law from God.³ We are being set up to think of Jesus in the context of slavery and liberation, of Joseph and Moses.

The directness of the narrative is disturbed by the various comments that puncture and follow it. In the first set of comments, Jesus rebukes towns that may not receive his messengers. In the comments that follow the narrative, Jesus is quite opaque in what he says. These are the parts of the gospel reading to which we must, this morning, turn our attention. The story as a whole needs much more inspection than we might have thought at first.

The first interlude consists of rebukes to some towns who might not receive his messengers. It starts when Jesus concludes his instructions to his disciples by saying that Sodom will fare better in its judgement than such a town. He goes on to make some similar comments about Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum. Things would be better for Tyre and Sidon than for them. These three towns formed a triangle at the northern end of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus had made his headquarters at Capernaum, which was where Peter lived. He was very familiar with the district and could possibly predict what their reaction might be.

When Jesus refers to Sodom, he is using an historical worst case example to compare with the one actually before him. Tyre and Sidon were contemporary worst case examples because they were local pagan centres that would not be expected to respond well to Jewish missionaries. But of what was Sodom the worst case? We are accustomed to thinking of Sodom in relation to homosexuality in general and to homosexual rape in particular.

What today's Gospel tells us is that Jesus thought Sodom to be a worst case example of the lack of hospitality; nothing to do with sexuality. We may be somewhat surprised to find the lack of hospitality elevated to this high degree, an offence worthy of fiery destruction. We are accustomed to think of hospitality in less extreme terms. It is a good thing, a very good thing perhaps, but is its absence worthy of fiery destruction? For us, hospitality is benign. We imagine ourselves to be hospitable.

¹ Readings: 2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; Galatians 6 (1-6), 7-18; Luke 10: 1-24

² Genesis 46:27

³ Exodus 24:1

Contrary to our popular feeling, hospitality is a very dangerous quality indeed. Despite our self-evaluation, most of us are not hospitable. We ought to know this when we consider our country's unjustified popular reactions to asylum seekers. This debate is built principally on fear, and not on the undoubtedly proper wish to avoid maritime deaths that is now the public face of the debate.⁴

Deep down we know that hospitality is dangerous. We all take care about who we allow into our homes. In a sense, we desire to entertain ourselves or, at least, those like us. Hospitality is dangerous because it exposes us to the other, to the stranger. The arrival of the messengers sent by Jesus was, to those towns, very dangerous, as indeed their arrival is to us, because they potentially exposed their hosts to the ultimate other, the true stranger, God.

Ben Myers, in his account of the theology of Rowan Williams, comments on this aspect of the gospel. He writes:

We all end up with what we most desire. If what I ultimately desire is myself, that is just what I will get: it is called hell. That's what Milton's Lucifer discovered, that hell is not an external environment but the small interior wasteland of the self: 'Which way I flie is Hell; my self am Hell.'⁵

That is why Sodom is the worst case example. The inhabitants of Sodom were inhospitable to Lot's visitors who are described in Genesis as messengers of God.⁶ Sodom was thus directly comparable with the towns of Galilee. Whether in fire or not, they faced the hell of their self-desire; their inhospitality; their rejection of the other.

So we must not think of this story in benign terms, but in terms of threat and danger; danger to our self-satisfaction; danger to our easy acceptance of who God really is; danger to our desire for ourselves. What these comments also reveal is that the fate of Sodom, Tyre, Sidon, Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum is not so much a punishment as a consequence of who they were and how they behaved.

If all that were not enough, Jesus follows up the narrative with still more disturbing comments. They are full of strange allusions. What do we make of his comment that he saw Satan fall from heaven like lightning?

I want first to cast our minds back to last Sunday's gospel. Both last week and this week take place as Jesus begins his final journey to Jerusalem. Last week also dealt with hospitality when they were repelled from a Samaritan village. Jesus rebuked James and John when they suggested calling down fire from heaven. Like the towns referred to in today's gospel, the Samaritans also preferred themselves to strangers. So the theme of hospitality, and the consequences of its failure, links the two Sundays' readings together.

The other underlying theme is violence. The suggestion is that God will bring down violence as punishment on those who are recalcitrant. We can see that in the request made by James and John and, most certainly, in the reference to Sodom. How does Jesus deal with this? As we saw last week, he rebuked James and John and simply moved on to another location;

⁴ See Refugee Facts <http://refugeefacts.cpd.org.au/> . For other resources on this subject, see the Catholic Social Justice Council <http://socialjustice.catholic.org.au/social-teaching/issues/110-refugees>

⁵ Benjamin Myers, *Christ the Stranger: the Theology of Rowan Williams*, London, T&T Clark, 2012, p. 115;

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 4.75 http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/milton/pl_r.pdf

⁶ Genesis 19:1

that's also what he tells his disciples in this week's Gospel. As we see in this week's reading, Jesus uses the idea of violence principally to prick the self-satisfaction of those who are inhospitable to his messengers. But is there something more? Whilst it is quite positive to avoid confrontation and to use analogies to violence for teaching purposes, what about the idea of violence itself? The analogies only work if, behind them, is the thought that God really does act that way. James and John only suggested fire from heaven because they thought that God might, and possibly should, act that way. It seems that the violence is integral to the concept of God.

We don't need to study the world deeply to know that violence is endemic. We would need to be deliberately negligent not to know that violence is often brought into play by religious groups in both their theology and their behaviour by imagining the wrath and violence of God.

Against this background, Jesus proclaims that he saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Apparently some kind of victory has happened in this seemingly simple sending out of messengers. What could it be?

We are not familiar with talk about Satan. Our baptism liturgy asks the child's parents and godparents whether or not they renounce Satan and all evil. I often wonder what they think when they hear this question. The evil bit is OK. After all, who would admit to embracing evil? But Satan? Like sin, Satan rarely enters into our discourse. Evil might be rejected, but sin seems to be a bit strong. Surely Satan is a myth. Yes, Satan is a myth, but that is no reason for neglecting him. Satan's role in the gospels is to characterise the way of the world. Satan personalises the way in which we characteristically deal with each other.⁷

Let's return to the towns that reject the messengers. They have simply followed the way of the world in their negligence of hospitality. Far from being concerned about this, they see their actions as properly protective of their identity and security, when they are actually destructive of them. To bring the discussion home, we are taught to believe that our refugee policy is protective of our national identity and security; that, therefore, we should be the ones who will determine who comes to the country. Leaving aside the unpalatable fact that all of us in this church today are descended from those who came to this country without any permission from, or concern for, the original inhabitants, our actions are destructive of our national integrity. Satan has been successful in tempting us so to behave. It is, after all, the way of the world.

So, how is it that Satan falls? What is it that Jesus does to bring an end to Satan's power? We must remember that Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem. When he arrives, he will be subject to and suffer violence of an extreme kind as an innocent victim.

René Girard, in his book aptly titled, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, makes this comment:

The word of the gospel is unique in really problematizing human violence. All other sources on humankind resolve the question of violence before it is even asked. Either the violence is considered divine (myths), or it is attributed to human nature (biology), or it is restricted to certain people or types of persons only (who then make excellent scapegoats) ... Or yet again violence is held to be too accidental and exceptional for human knowledge to consider. ...

⁷ See Scott Cowdell, *René Girard and Secular Modernity*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 2013, p. 27

As we stand before ... Jesus ... we wonder why so many mobs expel and massacre so many innocent persons. Why are so many communities caught up in madness?⁸

Part of the answer to this question is the problem of the stranger. Girard suggests that, if Satan falls from heaven, it is only because we now know, or can know, that he is not transcendent, that the cycle of violence can be broken. It is not that it is broken. Satan, fallen from heaven like lightning, is still active on earth. The messengers sent by Jesus avoided violence only by careful withdrawal.

In a comment on the bombings at the Boston Marathon, Bishop John Shelby Spong noted that our survival fears will always find expression in actions against the stranger, the other. He said that 'Religious devotees must also put an end to demonizing any child of God on the basis of race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, nationality or religion.'⁹ And so we should.

I imagine that you didn't expect to end up here when you heard the gospel being read. I didn't either when I started my preparation for this sermon. That's what preaching is all about, following the text to see where it will go.

⁸ René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, New York, Maryknoll Books, 2002, p. 184

⁹ <http://reinventingsdawheel.blogspot.com.au/2013/05/making-sense-of-violence-and-terror-in.html>