

Cambridge University Sermon preached by Professor Rachel Muers on 29 January 2023

Title: Making Evil Boring Again

Text: Philippians 4:4-9.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.⁶ Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.⁹ Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Sermon

The bad guys are always the interesting ones - in fiction but also in the representation and marketing of real life. Mad, bad and dangerous to know is romantic. True crime and the lives of the world's worst dictators aren't about to lose popularity. And certainly when I gave this sermon a title I was thinking about just how much media time and attention had been consumed with horrified tracing of the twists and turns of various kinds of dramatically, showily bad government.

And we know, I think, that turning evil into the exotic spectacle of the monster gives it both less and more than its due. More because it makes evil the whole story, captures the attention; and less because it makes evil nothing to do with us and nowhere in us, something over there to be booed from a safe distance.

You could write that sermon. We could all be suitably disapproving of tabloid scandals and monsterring. But I worry about another dimension of our relationship to evil. About a social and media ecosystem that gets its excitement and interest and clicks from finding large and small instances of evil everywhere, or at least everywhere outside our precarious circle of obviously correct people. And I worry about how my earnest desire to take evil seriously, to have a realistic view of just how bad things are, to be properly critical of everything that needs to be critiqued, might be feeding a problem.

The apostle says: Rejoice in the Lord always; whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about *these* things.

If we're quite enjoying the excitement of evil – the apostle, when he advises rejoicing, and when he enjoins his hearers to think about whatever is true, honourable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent or worthy of praise, sounds worthy but dull. Whereas if we're genuinely preoccupied with, distressed by, caught up in the onslaught of bad news –

or furious at the loss of trustworthiness or grief-stricken at the losses of natural beauty or all of those things at once - he sounds Pollyanna-ish to the point of being comical or offensive. After all he's writing from a Roman prison to the people whom he's just told, earlier in the letter, to have the same mind as someone who was tortured to death by functionaries of the Roman empire, and now he says, always look on the bright side of life. I've read our text at weddings, maybe some of you have as well. Keep it for special happy occasions when we want as little controversy as possible and we expect some glossing over of faults. It's hard to take it seriously.

But as many of you will know there's a long and deep-rooted tradition in Christian thought of saying about evil, it's really *not a thing*. And you'll notice that when the apostle, in the text we have heard, wants to encourage his hearers, he doesn't just turn them away from evil, he doesn't even mention it. It's just not a thing. Move along, there's nothing to see.

It's negation, it's absence, privation of good if you want the terminology. It's not even a deep and profound abyss into which you can gaze and think deep thoughts. There is just nothing to see here. On the one hand there is everything God creates and loves, in its manifold and ever-unfolding glory and goodness, in things seen and unseen, more and more the closer you look; and on the other hand, there isn't.

If evil is darkness, as it so often is in and beyond Christian scripture and tradition, it's not the beauty of a starlit sky, or the peace of an evening, it's as Jesus says in John's Gospel the night where nobody can work, we just stop.

The first time people hear this idea of evil as a privation of good they often think it underestimates evil. You can't say that all of the horrors we bring on ourselves and each other and the structures we build to keep them going are *nothing*.

You can sometimes start to reckon with it by thinking about all the ways in which an absence can be horrifyingly powerful, can overtake and overturn us. You can approach it another way by thinking about the evil as *senseless destruction*, the negation of the true and the honourable and the pleasing and the commendable and the everyday, eminently missable, ordinary good.

Children's fiction has sometimes done a good job of seeing straight through the glitter or the romance and portraying evil as nothingness. In the *Neverending Story* the threat is named simply the Nothing – ever encroaching on the unfolding story, restricting and shrinking it – and it stands for the loss of everything that children delight in, imagination, creativity, the multiplicity of beautiful things.

Or to approach it another way, I sometimes speak about Hannah Arendt's account of the banality of evil, which she saw disclosed in the trial of Adolf Eichmann. She didn't just mean that evil was everyday or ordinary, but that it was *banal*, with a pathological lack of depth, as she put it the *inability to think from the standpoint of another*, the loss of the world, the loss of the other. And that this isn't just a characteristic of evil people, it can be a situation, a predicament, a condition.

The trick that evil pulls, the big lie of the father of lies if you like, is to make you believe that *nothing* is true or honourable or just or worth taking seriously, whatever looks good or true will only let you down. Look how small and how many and how different and how frail the good things are; and the only interest remaining, the only thing worth attending to, is the ensuing destruction, the takedown. Which you'd better join in or it might happen to you. And somehow we get taken in.

Here's one example of how that works.

There seems to be quite a widespread sense that the media ecosystem we inhabit, that's been both deliberately created and accidentally embraced, thrives on proving false what is claimed to be true, proving dishonourable what is claimed to be honourable, leaving as little as possible that's pure or commendable or worthy of praise. Which can deliver a rapid hit of moral or aesthetic self-satisfaction provided it's happening to someone I disapprove of in the name of something I approve of, but which somehow doesn't seem to leave more space for truth or honour or justice to appear or be recognised.

One take-down gives rise to another We say of people in the public eye or words in the public sphere, and it's all a comfortable joke, they are all as bad as each other, there's nothing *really* true, honourable, just, pure, commendable. There's a kind of levelling down, across-the-board discount of trust. And knowing that this is a problem doesn't always help. Partly because the spectacle can be entertaining as well as horrifying and partly because the pull to believe in nothing or to trust nothing is also rooted deep in the human heart. It's difficult and weird and decentring to attend to a truth I didn't make and don't control. It's easier to shove it away.

And the point when we are captivated with reciprocal take-downs that are leaving all reputations and all claims to truth in the dust is when we might need the voices of scripture and tradition to come in and say gently: you know, when you think about it, there's really nothing to see here. Nothing worth your time and attention.

In the face of this, the apostle is inviting his hearers to take the good seriously, to take it into account, to reason about it, and not only the large-scale dramatic good but the everyday good, the 'whatever is', even 'whatever is pleasing', so even sometimes to take a thing at face value, to trust ordinary love and delight. And it seems to me that in his context or in ours this is quite the opposite of a light-hearted bit of life advice. It's an invitation based on a promise. The promise is that God holds and guards the multitude of partially and precariously good things, and makes evil – absolutely nothing worth caring about. It makes sense to the people who live in the light of the resurrection of the crucified one.

Let me take the apostle at his word and speak with you about small things just and honourable and of good report. Especially as we have prayed for those who suffer persecution for conscience's sake. Since last February I've been looking for and listening to testimony from people in Russia who are steadfastly opposed to the war and trying every day to navigate the world from that position. Some of it bursts out in public examples of civil courage, a woman holding up a sign during the main news bulletin on a state broadcaster. Some of it one can find in social media, like the activist who makes a painstaking collection

of photographs of slogans left in public places, “no war”, a tiny little gesture towards truth in chalked letters on a pavement.

Some of it you won't see. One person described to me vividly what it's like being surrounded by propaganda that you know is lies, by the silencing of any voice speaking up for truth, and afraid to speak with those around them. The person said, I thought I was pretty strong and self-reliant, you don't know until it happens what it's like to be unable to talk, to think together, to discuss alternatives to what we see, even to say what we know is true. Like sitting alone in the dark all the time.

So in at least some situations taking whatever is true and whatever is of good report seriously, speaking about it, reasoning about it, placing it on record, is a profound act of faith and resistance. And I want to ask whether and how we need to be practising it even here and now. We're not living in totalitarian space. But we're still liable to be drawn into the idea that there's *nothing* to be done, that there's no alternative, to the ongoing destruction of natural ecosystems and all their particular goods, and no alternative to the erosion of trust and social solidarity.

And that's where our text strikes to the heart of the matter because it speaks to the everyday activity of attention and care and thinking, in a community, as ministry to each other and to the world.

With the promise of the apostle ringing in our ears, with the promise of the peace of God to guard our hearts and minds, let us have the confidence to take seriously the many small things that are true, to speak about the many small things that are of honourable and just, to dwell on and reflect on the many small things that are pleasing and of good report. Because whatever threatens them is or us is *absolutely nothing* to the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.