

4th Sunday of Lent (Year B): Does God have a ‘plan’ in our history?

1st Reading: 2 Chronicles 36: 14-16+19-23: Israel’s history = God’s plan?
2nd Reading: Ephesians 2:4-10: God’s loving plan for us, his ‘work of art’;
Gospel: John 3:14-21: Jesus’ crucifixion: a proof that God loves us.

If you have a missal printed after 1970, it is worth reading the psalm after this Sunday’s first reading. Psalm 136 (137 in non-RC bibles) is the beautiful, haunting lament sung in exile, “By the rivers of Babylon”. Its theme is: how did we end up in this mess? How can we sing our traditional music for our captors, far from home, far from the ‘promised land’? The first reading, from a late Old Testament history-book, tries to answer the question. However, this is history “not as we know it”, because the author has a strong, religious slant: everything is seen from the point of view of obeying or disobeying divine rules. This was especially true for the upper class, the priesthood and other influential people. Israel ended up in exile because they had all broken God’s Law. But God did not leave it there: he used Cyrus, the pagan king who had captured the Babylonian empire, to allow his people to return home from exile. More: God persuaded Cyrus to order the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. Thus, thanks to God, using Cyrus as his agent, Jewish history came full circle.

Few modern scholars would write history with this totally religious bias, but it does raise important questions for us, especially given the current wars in Europe & Gaza. How far can we say each good or bad event is God’s will? Can there be a religious view of history? (Did God unleash Putin & Hamas ‘to teach people a lesson’?) Can we say that some non-religious people (like Cyrus) are “used” by God to achieve a good purpose? For example, the Nazi regime in Germany was mainly defeated by the armies of the ghastly Russian dictator Stalin, (I suspect that no democracy could have stomached the mass killings on the eastern front needed to achieve this.) So, was Stalin God’s ‘instrument’?

To be honest, I do not know the answers to those questions. However, keeping to the last century, the First World War seems to have wrecked many people’s religious faith – the killing was seen as senseless and unproductive, destroying a whole generation. In contrast, the Second World War produced a different reaction: the discovery of the Nazi concentration and death camps gave the war the sense of having been a crusade against evil, for which all were grateful. This is not totally unlike the way the writer of the Book of Chronicles saw history: there were ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sides; thankfully, the ‘bad’ side lost.

I think most of us believe that ‘good’ and ‘evil’ do exist. By ‘evil’, I do not just mean natural disasters like floods, droughts, epidemics, famines, accidents, etc. These things can be made worse by selfishness, indifference or incompetence. (Think of historical accidents in badly-run coal-mines, on unsafe ships, etc.) People suffering such things know they are suffering ‘evil’. But I suggest that even worse are those situations where full human malice is at work: assassination, brutal territorial expansion, tyranny, oppression of minorities & workers, and so on. In those cases, the suffering of others is often deliberately willed, either to hurt them on purpose, or to achieve something else. Most people recognise that as the worst form of “evil”.

Does this mean “The Devil”? Our Church has traditionally spoken of a personal evil force in the Universe: one that urges us to sin, mis-using our God-given abilities. We must be careful not to say that this evil ‘being’ is as strong as God’s force for good, otherwise God would not be supreme. But history shows us that the human race has lost its way – look at the amazing popularity of Hitler (and demagogues like him). They retained much popular support - as long as they were winning. But even you and I can go off-course too. Although we are not in the same league as Hitler, Stalin, etc, our bad choices can lead to disaster for ourselves and others. How much family misery is due to someone’s addiction to gambling, drink or drugs? Even if these things are not “evil” in the Hitler/Stalin sense, the effects are still awful for those who suffer them.

But we must not despair. In the 2nd Reading, St Paul writes: *“It is by grace you have been saved – through faith; not by anything of your own, but by a gift of God. We are God’s work of art...to live the good life, as he had meant us to live it.”* Paul clearly thinks that evil can be overcome, with God’s help. In the gospel, Jesus refers to his future crucifixion. Anyone might think that this would be a situation where evil was winning. However, his being ‘lifted up’ (on the cross) would be like the time when Moses ‘lifted up’ a bronze serpent to help cure some Jews bitten by snakes in the desert. (Numbers 21:4-9). In other words, good would come out of it. Jesus says about his own mission: *“God sent His Son into the world, not to condemn it, but so that through him, it might be saved.”* With three weeks of Lent remaining, can we look on the bright side? The days are getting lighter (even a little warmer!); there has been a fall in inflation, which had made life so difficult for so many. Yes, the problem of ‘evil’ still exists (think of violent Gaza war protests on many city streets), but with God’s help, and our working together, it will not win. *Fr Jim Dunne.*

