

CALLING OUT EVIL

Peter Cullinane

March 2021

INTRODUCTION

The unfolding of God's plan for us does not run in parallel with our ordinary lives and ordinary human history. Ordinary life is what God is bringing to its fulfilment. That fulfilment is already assured in Jesus' resurrection, and becomes ours through union with Him.

But we know there are also darker forces at work in the world. So, just as we need to notice the signs of God's creative and saving love, so too, we need to be alert to what is evil - also fermenting within 'ordinary' life. It is a matter of sharpening our moral awareness, and standing up for what is right - all the more because it is not the State's role to criminalize all forms of wrong doing. So, what is involved when we talk about evil in today's world?

In many ways sin brings its own punishment. But Jesus taught us not to make a simplistic connection between suffering and supposed sins. Nor may we scapegoat, by simply blaming evil forces for unwanted human behaviour and natural events. To take responsibility is part of what it means to be human, and to be fully human and alive is God's agenda for us - and is how we honour God. But it would be naïve not to call out the sources of evil, wherever in ordinary life they show up.

NOT WANTING TO KNOW

It hardly matters that Jesus and his contemporaries did not have our scientific understanding of illnesses. Relieving suffering humanity, whatever the source of suffering, including malign spiritual activity, was a sign of Jesus' mission.

It doesn't occur to us to blame people who lived in pre-scientific times for not having scientific answers. They assumed the sun revolved around planet earth, and that the world was flat. Their scholarship was also pre-scientific, so they assumed the Genesis account of creation over seven days was historical narrative.

But it is one thing to have pre-scientific understanding in pre-scientific times. It is quite another to benefit by today's sciences but then turn a blind eye because the scientific facts don't suit some agenda or match someone's slogans. Scientists could have explained that it really was snow that blanketed Texas, and not some other substance sent by President Biden and Google! And scientists world-wide testify to the reality of Covid 19 and the need for hygienic measures against it; no need to misrepresent and mock Pope Francis' teachings!

It seems that conspiracy theories have always been around, mainly on the fringes. And it seems that social media now help to mainstream them, just by making them available to people who often feel alienated in some way and suspicious of official explanations, and are looking for alternative explanations.

Again, we need not attribute blame. Nevertheless, there is an element of irrationality in preferring theories that are greatly more implausible and bizarre than anything the sciences propose; in fact, closer to the explanations of soothsayers and witchdoctors of pre-scientific times. There is also an element of bondage in the way such theories can take hold, and sometimes a certain aggressiveness and hankering for confrontation. Something more than just misunderstanding is involved here.

SOMETHING MORE

Perhaps there is a clue to this “something more” in what the Book of Revelation says about Satan’s involvement in human affairs and his being “in a rage because he knows that his time is short” (12:12).

The origin of moral evil is ultimately mysterious. It doesn’t properly belong within a creation that “God saw was good”, indeed, “very good”. Hebrew faith’s attempt to explain pointed to a source outside of human nature, that is capable of deceiving us, and to human free will. In the Hebrew and Christian scriptures Satan is depicted as “a murderer and liar”, indeed “the father of lies”, “deceiver”, “prince of darkness” and “enemy of humanity”, which is what the name Satan means. And anti-human is still his trademark. (Is it possible to watch 1930s film of Hitler addressing the crowds and their being taken in by him, without thinking of a satanic power at work – in ways that looked ordinary?) In the prayer Jesus taught us, we ask to be delivered from the power of the evil one.

A more recent example of the misuse of power showed itself in shameless lies, vilification and vengeful retaliation against critics, officials and commentators, tacit incitement to violence, corruption and self-glorification – and crowds being taken in by him. These characteristics, singly and together, are anti-human just by being divisive and destructive of human relationships.

DEEPER THAN POLITICS – CULTURE

When a leader is a catalyst for such anti-human activities, it is likely that he is also the product of a culture that has made it easy for him to be and act like that, with impunity. We might feel that kind of politics is “not us”. But what about the cultural chaos out of which it emerges – when the underlying planks of human decency and requirements of civilized life are being eroded? For example:

- When it becomes acceptable to deny facts - scientific facts (“the pandemic isn’t happening”); or historical facts (“the Holocaust didn’t happen”), and acceptable to speak blithely of falsehoods as “alternative facts”, it is reality that is not being accepted. How can there be genuine dialogue if facts don’t matter? How can there be education? What would be the point of historical records? ...
- When truth means whatever the individual wants it to mean, the result is shallow thinking and the kind of gullibility that will believe anything. And those who relativize truth in this way leave us without grounds to regard them as reliable and credible.
- Ideological clamouring for “my rights” without similar commitment to, or even mention of, “my responsibilities” can be a self-centred disregard for the common good.
- Freedom of speech is sometimes spoken of as if it has no boundaries, not even respect for the innate dignity of other persons. Unfettered discussion of ideas, yes; trashing persons, no. Otherwise, what is wrong with deception, cyber bullying, and even violence?
- The best way of countering misinformation and people’s fears is by trustworthy reporting and reliable information. A weakness within kiwi culture is the general public’s low expectations regarding news coverage and analysis. TV coverage is ‘lite’, as any comparison with BBC or Aljazeera shows. Years of getting less leads to expecting less – a gradual process

of dumbing down. The situation worsens as TV channels increasingly resort to the techniques of entertainment as the way they present their news “shows”.

- A culture erodes when self-indulgence is not matched by self-control: the sheer extent of physical and sexual abuse against women, both in NZ and world-wide, and the circumstances in which that violence spikes (e.g. during pandemic lockdowns), strongly indicate that the missing factor in many men is the virtue of self-control. Virtue, by definition, is difficult choices made easier through practice. We practise self-control whenever we choose not to do something we would like to do. If self-control isn't practised during growing-up years, expect violence later. A society that belittles the practice of chastity cannot expect its rates of violence against women to go down. Violence served up as entertainment ‘normalises’ violence; trivialising sexuality ‘normalises’ its misuse.

OTHER FORMS OF ANTI-HUMAN BEHAVIOUR

Anti-human behaviour, though sometimes strident, is not always carried out with bluster. Sometimes it just quietly ignores the findings of science. For example: the slogan “it’s my body” is intended to direct attention away from the scientific fact that the newly conceived is actually someone else’s body; scientifically speaking, it is a “microscopic human being” with its own identity, even before implantation in the womb. It needs only to develop, and for this it needs its mother’s body. But it is not just a part of her body, and so the slogan is deceitful.

Anti-human behaviour is not limited to where it kills relationships and lives. On the spectrum of ‘ordinary’ life, people’s commercial and business activities can also be blighted by the anti-human virus. Systems that widen the gap between a wealthy class and homelessness are ultimately anti-human. For example:

In the housing market, de facto priority is given to investors and speculators for whom houses are commodities more than they are homes. Newsreaders speak in glowing terms of a “strong” market and of “growth”, always from the perspective of those who profit by higher prices, to the disadvantage of those who are struggling to get a home, many squeezed between homelessness and high rents. Banks continue to refine their methods of making financial transactions, not just by installing more sophisticated systems that reduce their workforce, but also by removing simpler, customer friendly systems. Like it or not, technocracy leads to elitism and exclusion.

Anti-human activity, and anti-science ideology, reach fever pitch when promoted in the name of “religion”. This is hardly surprising because “religion” of this kind is at war with itself, given that religion, properly understood, is pro-human and pro-science. ISIS carries out atrocities and murders in the name of Islam, which it grossly misrepresents.

Catholics who grossly misunderstand their faith also conduct attacks that are venomous. Fellow Catholics find themselves being vilified, subjected to name-calling and mockery, slandered by the misrepresentation of their intentions and their actions. Significantly, some of those who indulge in this kind of abuse seem to get most satisfaction when their targets are authority figures. It is as if to pull themselves up they need to pull others down.

Even here, there is no need to apportion blame; many act out of various kinds of insecurity and especially fear, and in some cases trauma and mental health issues. But it is necessary to judge their actions. How do their actions measure up to Christian norms of behaviour? According to St Paul, Christians are to avoid all “bitterness, hard words, slander and malice” (Eph. 4:31), and stop “biting and tearing one another to pieces” (Gal. 5:15). Websites devoid of love don’t make the cut.

ORDINARY BUT NOT NORMAL

It is an ancient teaching that “you shall not allege the example of the many as an excuse for doing wrong”. (Exodus 23:2).

Many other evils, some much worse, could have been named in this essay. But this sample suffices to make the point that anti-human activities, unchallenged, are gradually deemed ‘normal’ and socially acceptable - and even legally sanctioned. Tracking that trajectory, especially the progression from cultural erosion to social, political and economic disorders and personal tragedies, could be a useful exercise in critical thinking for senior college students – the formation of future leaders.