HOMILY FOR SUNDAY ORDINARY 31 YEAR A

5 NOVEMBER 2017 ST BENET’S HALL

What count as absolute evils in any circumstances, at all times in our world today? That may be a question that beckons into a philosophical thicket, but to focus on a homily short answer, I think many would include such evils and sins as human trafficking, drug dealing, child sexual abuse, ethnic cleansing on such a list. It is a list of course with a modern ring. For first century people we know that prostitution and the collaboration with imperialism represented by tax collecting were life poisoning sins and evils, at least those are sins often mentioned in the Gospels.

Now I think that no one would seek to argue that Jesus justified these evils, though some thought he was soft on the perpetrators. We know that tax collectors and prostitutes – at least some of them – were among those who responded to Jesus’ call to repentance and who opened themselves to God’s grace and it was not perpetrators of these evils, evil though they be, who sought Jesus’ crucifixion.

Today’s first reading and gospel speak of a rather different sort of sin and evil. The prophet Malachi condemns priests who exercise their priesthood for their own gain – the phrase is to show partiality in their administration – and chapter 23 of Matthew’s gospel from which we are given a sample for this Sunday only once every three years, inveighs in very strong terms against the behaviour of the scribes and Pharisees.

Now at first sight Jesus’ considerable ire may seem somewhat excessive, misplaced and misdirected. Parading in fancy robes with broader phylacteries and longer tassels may appear comic even bizarre, rather than grossly sinful. Being greeted as Father or Master likewise. And some might even justify vestments as a sign of the sacred, and titles as being family ones, not ones of honour.

Yet I think it is a chastening thought that it was those so condemned by Jesus, who arranged his crucifixion, not the tax collectors and prostitutes, even the unrepentant ones. At this point, however, we may effect a manoeuvre and it may be this, that just as thank heavens we are not human traffickers, drug dealers and so forth, so manifestly we are not scribes or Pharisees, the crucifiers of the Lord. If tempted to think in this way, we need to look again at their sin.

The clues to the evil are in Jesus’ words ‘everything they do is done to attract attention’ and in the phrase to be ‘greeted obsequiously’, referring it seems to a self-image built up by human pride, and which so far as it is adrift from the reality of our human situation, always leads to a measure of hypocrisy, of pretence. On this understanding, pride is an astigmatism of the human soul, which sees itself at the centre of everything, secretly despises others and covertly resents God. Over the centuries a crowd of spiritual writers suggest to us that the perpetrators of this sin are not ‘them’, those we can label as outsiders, but rather that it is us, that it is well-nigh universal to succumb to human pride. This sin, says Jesus, is not theirs but yours. It is not gross and manifest, but secret and that is its insidious power.

The one thing that will make of this a *felix culpa*, a happy sin, is if it brings us to the realization that after all we have absolutely no power of ourselves to help ourselves, absolutely none, and that we steadfastly and resolutely refuse to evade or minimise that realization. This seems to be the great battleground of the spiritual life, to see that we are not the centre, to stop despising others and above all to stop secretly resenting God for the fact that we are not able to be the authors of our own salvation.

St Benedict’s long chapter 7 is on humility; it incorporates twelve steps, though they are more revolving than consecutive. They need a fair old amount of translation, explanation and reflection, even after they have been rendered into English and that is not a task for this homily. I am concerned just to dwell on how St Benedict introduces his famous image, not unique to him, of a ladder of humility.

He begins by quoting the final verse of today’s gospel ‘anyone who exalts himself will be humbled and anyone who humbles himself will be exalted’ and then he quotes from today’s psalm, the image of the weaned child on its mother’s breast, not for him an image of comfort, but in fact an image of a primal crossness at finding ourselves separated, no longer omnipotent, needing to come to terms with the other and no longer at the centre. I think this is something rather like St Therese of Lisieux coming to terms with being the toy God has discarded. The steps of humility face us with daily irritations with others, daily disappointments with self and they expose, maybe most painfully a daily resentment with God. We are not saints yet – that seems to be God’s most important lesson for us and it is so hard not to be cross about that.

In presenting the steps of a humility as a ladder, St Benedict poses us with the dizzying paradox of descending by exaltation and ascending by humility. This makes it sound as though this is all going to be ‘our’ work. But then then there is a little phrase easy to miss at the end of the introduction to the ladder image and it is this: ‘Now the ladder erected is our life on earth, and if we humble our hearts, the Lord will raise it [that is the ladder] to heaven’. We do not climb up. We walk a path and God raises it up.