

De-Potentiating the Powers of Evil

Good Friday 2009

In Zimbabwe Morgan Tsvangirai is pursuing a risky strategy. He has got the message that the outside world isn't going to intervene. There has been intense pressure from neighbouring African leaders on him to be prepared to enter a compromise coalition government. And the country is on the ropes as economic collapse, food shortages, and cholera and Aids decimate the population. So he has decided to endure the unendurable, and become the front man in a government of national unity with those who in the past are responsible for having him beaten, his wife assassinated, and his followers imprisoned and murdered.

Tsvangirai calculates that if he can get enough of his colleagues into key cabinet positions, if he can establish himself as the centre of moral gravity and executive reality in the day to day running of the government, then slowly but surely the bulk of the population and the potential aid donors of the wealthy west will take him seriously. As that happens key elements in the security forces will start taking their orders from him, and real power will slip away from Robert Mugabe and his murderous cronies in the Joint Operational Command. What will then follow will be the erosion of decision making authority away from Zanu PF, and all those who stole the last election, and the gradual emergence of the Movement for Democratic Change as the rightful party of government.

There are many Christians amongst the leadership of the Movement for Democratic Change. They have suffered much at the hands of their oppressors in the struggle to save Zimbabwe. There are hopeful

signs that the kind of gradual change I have just mentioned is beginning to happen. But it is early days yet, and the forces of evil have plenty of opportunities to keep up their wrecker agendas. My prayers are with the MDC and Morgan Tsvangirai.

Comparisons between political developments in our world and the way things happen in the Kingdom of God are always inexact, approximate and sometimes potentially misleading. But reflecting on what is going on in the governing circles in Zimbabwe has helped me to understand something of what it means to say that on the cross Jesus de-potentiated the forces of evil. That is to say that somehow in what Jesus achieved in his passion the root has been cut at its source that feeds and sustains all that makes for human folly, misery and self-destruction.

We are not accustomed to dwelling on this contest with the powers of evil aspect of the crucifixion, but earlier ages of Christian belief spoke about it often and boldly. Take for instance the Hippolytus Eucharistic liturgy; in many ways the model and source of the liturgy we use Sunday by Sunday. One of its key paragraphs reads:

Of his own free choice he was handed over to his passion in order to make an end of death and to shatter the chains of the evil one; to trample underfoot the powers of hell and to lead the righteous into light; to establish the boundaries of death and to manifest the resurrection.

In this way of looking at the death of Christ what stood out was that he had ambushed evil, deceived it - had sprung a great surprise on it. Thinking that it had him in his grasp it advanced on him, swallowed him up, and took him down into the

caverns of death. But it turned out that he had been prepared to go to the furthest point of God forsakenness in order to turn those distant bleak zones of the abode of the dead into a place where the resurrection light might shine. It was as though he had exploded out of the belly of the beast, rupturing it fatally, thereby greatly weakening its power in the world. Certainly it would no longer have ultimate determining authority in the way the world was run.

In our long Lenten look at the epistle to the Galatians we have seen Paul's take on this. The cross of Christ is the decisive event in the world that has shifted all the old boundary marks. The ancient divisions between Jew and Gentile, between men and women, between those living under the Law and those living outside it – all of these have been swept away. That old world founded on those traditional opposites disappeared at the crucifixion, to be replaced by a new creation. In this new world Jews and Gentiles, slaves and freemen, men and women are one in Jesus Christ.

What has changed things is that God invaded the space of this present evil age by sending his Son in a war of liberation to set things right in the unhappy world of humankind. The long reign of sin and death had created a broken world, one operating in a reduced light, rather like that of those grey overcast skies we have been having for so much of this past Summer, in which everything of grace, or glory, or goodness had been reduced to a dull, diminished, dismalness. What took place on the hill of Golgotha blew a hole in those leaden skies, to let the golden light of that other world, the Kingdom of God, pour through in all its illuminating inspiration. Thinking that it had nailed the Son, death had in fact thereby released into the world the Spirit of the

Son, who would now found new communities of faith, in which the fruits of the Spirit, love, joy peace, would be powerfully evident. These Spirit filled streams of grace would be the conduits for God's renewing energy now working powerfully to change the structures of the world.

Of course the forces of evil do not take this alarming state of affairs lying down. They do all they can to undermine these communities of Spirit filled faith by tempting and testing, deploying all their community destroying agendas by means of those malignant spiritual forces that Paul calls by the catch all term "Flesh." Sometimes they score some temporary successes. But they have had it in the long run because the spiritual realities summarised by the catch all Pauline expression "Spirit" have the upper hand. Maybe the Christian communities are small, maybe the scope of their pastoral and educational activities are limited, but somehow just by being what they are supposed to be they are slowly but surely changing everything in ways we cant see just right now.

There is one quality mark they must keep though about what they do in order for all this to happen. The message they proclaim, the message the world so desperately needs to hear but often tries to ignore, the message that must be lived out by the community if the Spirit is to be alive in their midst, is the message about the crucified one. The love of Christ crucified that is at the heart of this message is a love bigger and more sustaining than any of the self fulfilment loves shouted at us by novels, films and advertising jingles. This is the love that sees people for who they really are in all their spiritual potential, that can see past their present immaturity, or former betrayals, that can work its

way through tragedy and failure while remaining full of realism and hope. This is the love that enables the Christian community to mourn with those who mourn, and to rejoice with those who rejoice, and to really mean it.

Since the crucifixion then we live in a new world in which evil has had its wings decisively clipped. It still retains the ability to fight a stubborn rearguard action dealing many grievous blows to the righteous, and to lost humankind. This is because of the mystery of human freedom. The process of salvation is not automatic, an inexorable machine set in motion by the incarnation that relentlessly grinds its way to an outcome that has little to do with our decisions. God greatly values human creativity, and the generativity of our free moral choices. He is interested in the human story in all its unexpected turnings, and in all the subtle colourings of its sensibilities, mentalities and diversities. So though the foundations have shifted, though the boundary marks of our world have moved, we are permitted to go on choosing freely, and so the beguiling or intimidating forces of evil still have some capacity to interweave their empty promises into the narrative of human action.

However, slowly but surely the initiative is slipping away from them – they are yesterdays men, those who feed off what is good, but have no substance within them. As the body of Jesus was carried off the hill of Golgotha, evil had been greatly surprised and mortally wounded. As the Easter Eucharistic preface puts it:

The long reign of sin is ended, a broken world is being restored, and we are made whole once more.

Evil was no longer calling the shots, it had been de-potentiated, and its power and influence was slipping away. As the tidal waves pulled back from the shoreline, evil could feel the water sucking the sand out from under its feet.