

Out of the Ordinary

Luke 23:26-49

Good Friday

2nd April 2010

I wonder if read in the papers or heard on TV, a few weeks ago, that a certain young man named Jon Venables was back in the news. You probably remember the case back in 1993 when two 10 year old boys, Jon Venables and Robert Thompson, abducted 2 year old James Bulger from a shopping mall in Liverpool, England, then tortured and killed him, leaving him dead on a train track. Being children, the two offenders were sent to a juvenile facility. Then, amidst great controversy, they were released with new names and identities in the year 2000. Now, Venables has re-offended, though the nature of the offence has not yet been made public, and is being held in jail pending his case being heard.

At the time, people wondered – and, even 17 years later, still do wonder – how two relatively young children could have perpetrated such evil. The callousness of their crime was, and is, beyond comprehension. That these boys came from broken and dysfunctional homes, there is certainly no doubt. But other children have come from similar backgrounds and, while they may have got into the normal trouble kids get into, would never have perpetrated such cruelty against another human being, especially a toddler.

I remember when Venables and Thompson appeared in court, one journalist remarked how difficult it was, looking at the two boys in the dock, to believe that they had done what it was alleged they had done. Though the facts of the case, backed up by CCTV video evidence, were indisputable, they didn't appear to be any different than other boys of their age. There was no crazed look on their faces. They didn't have horns growing out of their heads. They did not have a particularly malicious demeanour. They didn't rant or rave. The journalist said that what disturbed him most of all was how ordinary they appeared.

In his book *Ordinary People and Extraordinary Evil*, Sociologist Fred Katz speaks to just this observation. "There are no special traits or behaviours that might set many malicious people apart as monsters," he says, "Most evil that occurs is done by ordinary people ... people who start out innocently and by gradual increments get into a position to enact real evil."¹ If only evil people came with a warning sign hung around their necks or stamped on their foreheads, it would make the world a much safer place. But, of course, that is not the case.

Reflecting on the film *Schindler's List*, United Methodist Bishop William Willimon says he "thought

that the most horrifying episode was the scene toward the beginning of the movie when they were bringing Polish Jews into the concentration camp. They lined the people up, and made them stand in rows before clerical accountant people who, with typewriters before them, registered the prisoners. It was so horrifying because it was so ordinary. They were just doing their jobs, just typing in information on government forms. Just registering people for their certain deaths in the camp. It was one thing to see evil done by the soldiers, the guards at the camp. But it was quite another thing to see evil done by ordinary, everyday people sitting before their typewriters."²

Ordinary people doing extraordinary evil. Wasn't that exactly what happened on Good Friday? Wasn't that what sent Jesus to the Cross? Ordinary people doing extraordinary evil. Yes, the people present when these events took place were just ordinary people. And the even more frightening thing is that they were ordinary people just like ourselves? When all's said and done, wasn't it voices like ours that called for Jesus' death? Tongues like ours that denied him? Lips like ours that kissed him? Hearts like ours that betrayed him? Legs like ours that fled into the fearful night? Hands like ours that hammered in the nails? Maybe 2000 odd years separate us from Calvary but, still, it was people just like us that were there that day and did what they did. People who were flesh of our flesh, blood of our blood, DNA of our DNA.

Coming to such a realisation is, of course, one of the hardest things we ever have to do as Christians. But the fact of the matter is this: It's only when we come to terms with this awful reality of personal involvement. Only when we say "I was there when they crucified my Lord".³ Only when we admit we individually bear responsibility. It's only then that we truly understand the real nature of evil ... that it's not something which is the sole preserve of some "monster" class of human beings ... that it's not something we can insulate and isolate ourselves from ... that it's not something we can plead has nothing to do with us.

Maybe, we clergy are partly responsible for the current communal Christian denial that separates us from personal responsibility in the death of Christ. After all, we don't want to alienate our congregations by reminding them of their involvement in the ills of the world. And, especially, we don't want to mention the "S" word. SIN. No, we will talk about anything in our sermons but that. Maybe we are like that fictional

clergyman in the verse entitled, “This Side of Calvin”:

*The Reverend Dr. Harcourt, folk agree,
Nodding their heads in solid satisfaction,
Is just the man for this community.
Tall, young, urbane, but capable of action,
He pleases where he serves. He marshals out
The younger crowd, lacks trace of clerical unction,
Cheers the Kiwanis and the Queen’s Scout,
Is popular at every public function.
And in the pulpit eloquently speaks
On diverse matters with both wit and clarity:
Art, Education, God, the Early Greeks,
Psychiatry, Saint Paul, true Christian charity,
Sanctuary repairs that shortly must begin.
All things but Sin ... He seldom mentions Sin.*⁴

Now the bad news may be that, like the Reverend Dr. Harcourt, we don’t want to mention the fact that ordinary people like ourselves are responsible for the sins of the world. Even worse, we don’t want to mention the fact we have an involvement in the extraordinary evil done to Jesus.

But though that’s the bad news, there is also good news. And the good news is, when we do understand and accept our ordinary involvement in extraordinary evil, then we become all the more able truly to appreciate the depth of God’s forgiveness. It’s then that we can truly realise what he means when he says to us, “This is my blood shed for you, for the remission of sins.”⁵ It’s then that we can truly appreciate how much he cares for us. It’s then that we truly appreciate the height, the breadth and the depth of his love, love that is “so amazing, so divine.”⁶

And there’s even more good news. God has the power, by means of his great love, to make a radical change in the hearts and minds of ordinary people like ourselves. To change that propensity for sin and evil. To turn our lives around so that we respond to him and to his world with the love that he has shown us on the cross.

Writer, William Ritter, tells of being out for a drive one Sunday afternoon when the children started to beat him on the back and say, “Daddy, Daddy, stop the car. There’s a kitten on the side of the road.” He says, “So, there’s a kitten at the side of the road. We’re having a nice afternoon drive.” “But, Daddy,” the kids insist, “you must stop and pick it up.” He replies, “We don’t need another animal in the house. It’s like a zoo already.” Finally, his wife turns to him and says: “Dear, I think you’ll have to stop.” So he turns the car around, returns to the spot, pulls off to the side of the road, and says: “You kids stay in the car. I’ll see about it.”

He goes out to pick up the kitten. The poor creature is just skin and bones ... all sore-eyed and full of fleas. But when he reaches down to pick it up, with its last bit

of energy the kitten bristles, baring tooth and claw. Sssst! He picks up the kitten by the loose skin of its neck, brings it over to the car, and says: “Don’t touch it. It’s probably got some dread disease.”⁷

Back home they go. When they get to the house, the children give the kitten several baths and a gallon of warm milk. Then they intercede. “Can we let it stay in the house, Daddy ... just for tonight?” So they fix a comfortable bed, fit for a pharaoh. Several weeks pass. Much TLC is dispensed. But it doesn’t seem to make any difference. There’s still much baring of teeth and hissing. Then one day, Ritter says, he walks in, feels something rub up against his leg, looks down, and there is the cat. He reaches down toward the animal expecting it to back off in hostile manner. But, surprisingly, when the cat sees his hand, it does not bare its claws and hiss. Instead, it arches its back to receive a caress and begins to purr.

The writer concludes that, if constant, unending, caring human love has the power to change a little animal like this, then we can readily understand how, in a much greater way, the love of God can transform our human hearts ... until we turn from our ways of sin and evil, and respond in genuine love and affection to the one who sent his Son to the cross to die for us.

Unfortunately, we must confess that we do live in a world today where ordinary people have the capacity to do extraordinary evil. And we must confess our part in it. But no matter. God has an even more extraordinary power over evil, a power demonstrated so superlatively on the Cross, a power that will always reign supreme. And, as it has in the past, God’s extraordinary power over evil will continue – not only in the present but on into the future – to make a world of difference, and a difference to our world.

© George A. Turner
St. Paul’s Presbyterian Church
Peterborough, Ontario

¹ Fred E. Katz, *Ordinary People and Extraordinary Evil: A Report on the Beguilings of Evil*, State University of New York Press, 1993 cf. Also Court TY Crime Library, “The Puppets”

http://www.crimelibrary.com/criminal_mind/psychology/evil/2/5.html

² William Willimon, “Killers Like Us”, *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 30, No.1, Year A, p55

³ “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” African-American Spiritual, Hymn #233, *The Book of Praise*, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1997

⁴ *The Miracle of Salvation*, An Anthology, www.eSermons.com

⁵ 1 Corinthians 11:24

⁶ “Love Divine, all loves excelling”, Hymn 371, *The Book of Praise*, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1997

⁷ William S. Ritter, *O Do Remember Me*, www.eSermons.com