



ST HELIERS CHURCH  
& COMMUNITY CENTRE



# TAKEAWAY SUNDAY SERMON

**19<sup>th</sup> November 2023, 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost,**

**Deliver us from evil by Rev Dr Jordan Redding**

*10 The next day an evil spirit from God rushed upon Saul, and he raved within his house, while David was playing the lyre, as he did day by day. Saul had his spear in his hand, 11 and Saul threw the spear, for he thought, "I will pin David to the wall." But David eluded him twice. 12 Saul was afraid of David because the Lord was with him but had departed from Saul. 13 So Saul removed him from his presence and made him a commander of a thousand, and David marched out and came in, leading the army. 14 David had success in all his undertakings, for the Lord was with him. 15 When Saul saw that he had great success, he stood in awe of him. 16 But all Israel and Judah loved David, for it was he who marched out and came in leading them. **1 Samuel 18:10-16***

*4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. 2 He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was famished. 3 The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." 4 But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" 5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" 7 Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" 8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, 9 and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." 10 Then Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" 11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him. **Matthew 4:1-11***

We come now to the last part of the Lord's Prayer: "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." If you've ever prayed with Catholics, you might notice they finish here and then awkwardly wait while we Protestants add an extra phrase: "For the kingdom, the power, and the glory..." And the Catholics have a point. The additional benediction, which we pray, isn't part of the earliest manuscripts. Jesus ends the prayer here, instructing us to pray to be delivered from evil.

To us Protestants it sounds unfinished. Like it's left on a cliff-hanger. And yet maybe that's the point. For we pray as people of faith in the midst of a world where evil is undeniably present. Our mode of existence is one of being delivered, led by God step by step into a new way of being human together.

There's a universal appeal to the prayer isn't there? After all, none of us need convincing that evil exists in the world. We're surrounded by it every day in the news headlines that we read.

But though we're surrounded by it, none of us wants to believe that we'll be overwhelmed by it. I imagine, none of us wants to believe that evil will conquer and have the final say. We want to believe that good will prevail. We want to believe that we are being delivered from evil and that it is worth fighting for what is good and right and true.

It's a narrative that we tell time and again and that captures our imaginations. The quintessential story that comes to mind is the Lord of the Rings. I'm sure even those of us who haven't watched the movies or read the books will be familiar with it.

As the story goes, the dark Lord Sauron, who is the embodiment of evil, creates a magical ring which has the power to rule the world. However, anyone who is in the possession of this all-powerful ring is gradually corrupted by its power, themselves becoming servants of the dark Lord.

The only solution therefore is to destroy the one ring in the fires of Mt. Doom, where it was forged. And the task falls to the hobbit, Frodo, and his friends who, because of their humble and unassuming existence are peculiarly resistant to the alluring power of the ring.

Spoiler alert: Frodo ends up successfully destroying the ring and the dark Lord Sauron's reign of terror is destroyed. Good prevails and the world is delivered from evil.

The story is a variation of a theme as ancient as history itself. The battle of good versus evil, order vs chaos, life vs death. There's a reason why the Lord of the Rings has a timeless appeal to it. And no doubt you'll be able to think of other examples that follow the same narrative arc.

Now I love the Lord of the Rings. But. I've also become aware of a critique of the story that has arisen in recent years. It's a valid critique. And once you see it, you can't unsee it.

Have you noticed that in the Lord of the Rings the "good guys" are from the West. They are white, and their culture is closely based on Anglo-Saxon culture. By contrast, the forces of evil are from the South and the East. Often reminiscent of Arab cultures. The orcs and goblins are given facial and body features that are commonly associated with people from Eastern parts of the world. In short, there is an underlying but undeniable racism to the whole Lord of the Rings story.

Now we could dismiss this critique by saying that Tolkien was a product of his time, which he was. But that doesn't mean the same problem, the same blindness, doesn't exist today. In fact, the Christchurch masjid/mosque shooting would suggest that the problem not only exists in 21<sup>st</sup> New Zealand, but it can and does have tragic real-world consequences. In short, if you believe a certain group of people are evil, inferior, or less than human – you can justify all sorts of action against them.

Things are particularly intense at the moment, of course, because of the escalating situation in the Middle East. We are hearing in this country from both Jewish people and Muslims of increased antisemitism on the one hand and Islamophobia on the other.

All of this I think reveals an uncomfortable truth about our desire to be delivered from evil. That when we think about deliverance from evil, we often assume uncritically that we're the good guys. And the people different from us are the bad guys, who are threatening our way of life and everything we hold dear. And therefore, deliverance from evil means protecting ourselves from the other. Even if it means violence. Even if it means death...

This dynamic is the driving force behind the emergence of the Israelite monarchy in the Old Testament. At the time, Israel was a small tribal nation, surrounded by other warring nations vying for space and resource.

As we hear in the book of 1 Samuel, with the imminent threat of invasion from the Philistines in the West, the people of Israel demand to be given a king. Not only would the king unite the gathered tribes and be a symbol of national identity, but the monarchy would also have the power and strength to protect the people from invasion from the hostile forces out there.

The prophet Samuel tries to dissuade the people. He reminds them that God is their King and will look after them. He reasons that, if they establish a monarchy, they would become slaves to this institution of military might and war. An institution that needs to be sustained by an army, which is expensive. Many young men would die and the wealth of the nation would get sucked up to sustain the military machine. In short, they might be delivered from one sort of evil, but institutionalise another.

Do the people listen? No. And so Samuel reluctantly anoints their first King, King Saul.

Initially, King Saul achieves what the people hoped he would. He unites the tribes under a common banner and forces back Israel's enemies, including the Philistines. He delivers them.

And yet...it soon becomes clear that even though the people had been delivered from their enemies, they had not been delivered from evil. For much the same way as Sauron's ring of power corrupts the wielder, so too we read in the Old Testament that Saul was corrupted by the power invested in him.

When a younger rival comes along – the famous David, who conquered Goliath – Saul is consumed by jealousy, hating David's success, and secretly planning his demise. Saul's descent into madness reaches a climax in our story today where we're told "an evil spirit" rushes upon him and he attempts to kill David in cold blood. This is the monarch that the people have created.

It turned out the monster isn't out there with the Philistines, the orcs, or the goblins. It is within. The "green-eyed monster" of jealousy, in Shakespeare's words, lurking deep within the human heart, corrupting from the inside out.

Saul's undoing is a sad tale. And David's isn't much better. Most of us would be familiar, for instance, with the story of Bathsheba, in which David acts in much the same way Saul does. In fact, the whole story of the Israelite monarchy in Samuel and in Kings is one of gradual corruption and decline leading ultimately to the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC.

And so the history reads like a long lesson on the corrupting influence of power. How does the saying go? Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

If that's the lesson of the history of Israel, then Jesus is the culmination of that history and its redemption. For Jesus, the Son of David, rejects the power of David.

Consider our gospel reading today. Jesus goes into the wilderness where the Satan, the adversary, tempts him with power "over all the kingdoms of the world". He offers to make him king. And yet, Jesus rejects such power. Here we encounter a different sort of king, who refuses to rule by coercion and strength of arm, whose glory is crowned with thorns rather than gold.

I've been thinking about what it means to pray, *deliver us from evil*, in light of Christ the crucified King (and remember it's him that tells us to pray these words, so we pray them with him in mind – we interpret them through him).

I reckon that when we human beings encounter evil, our instinct is to want to fight back. To take control. To protect ourselves. We want to accumulate power so that others won't exert power over us. We respond to violence with violence. To injustice with vengeance. To aggression with defensiveness. We erect walls and build battlements in order to defend ourselves.

It's understandable. But it will not deliver us from evil. I'm reminded of a lyric from the song, *Peace on Earth*, which says: "you become the monster so the monster will not break you." Such is the insidious power of evil.

Here's the awkward thing about the call to follow Christ: That his way is the way of the cross. So whatever else deliverance from evil looks like, it doesn't look like deliverance from the cross, or deliverance from suffering at the hands of our enemies.

That's a confronting thought.

I reckon to pray, *deliver us from evil*, -- in and through Christ -- is first and foremost to pray that we will be delivered from the green-eyed monster in here [point to heart]. To pray that we will not be given over to our anger and bitterness, our hatred and violence, our suspicion and fear. It is to pray that we will not seek our own life when it comes at the cost of someone else's. And to pray that we won't even find ourselves in a position where we need to make that call.

Lord, lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil – for your name's sake. Amen.