

On Tuesday evening last week, I met the Devil. It kind of took me by surprise. There I was in the crypt setting up for our fortnightly home group, when I thought I would check through the church building. At night, when you're on your own, lovely as the church is, it's a good idea to sometimes make sure you *are* the only one there, especially in the crypt when your mobile phone has no reception. I walked to the end of the corridor where the cafe used to be, and as I looked through the locked double doors near the GP surgery, a man descended the stairs.

Clothed in full Gothic dress, with long silver studded chains which linked across his chest and up onto the back of his ears; the man had his head shaved, painted white, with a black triangle upside down lining his face. He also had some prosthetics; nose and ear extensions, which made him look less a Goth, and more like Freddy Krueger. Our eyes met just briefly, but it had been a long day and I wanted to be ready for home group and I simply couldn't deal with it... so I walked off, convinced he couldn't get in. As I went to close the doors into the crypt hall, I looked up to see the man walking down the corridor... It gets better! No cell phone, no one around, in a locked crypt, being approached by someone who can clearly walk through walls and might not be a "safe" person to be around. The man walked right up to me, as I stood somewhat still, and in the most gentle, eloquent voice said, "Excuse me, is Lucifer here?" I said, "I beg your pardon?" The man said, "Lucifer? The exhibition, the statue, I was wondering if he was still here?" It occurred to me that he was talking about the art exhibit currently hanging in our sister church, Holy Trinity, down the street. So I gave him directions, he wished me a "pleasant *day*," and then he left.

It turned out that the door hadn't been locked properly earlier on, and so he comfortably, innocently opened the door, looking for an art exhibit. But it gave me some pause for thought. As

many of you know, I am someone who, when it comes to Gothic art, horror movies and the like, has a pretty high tolerance for most things. But this experience genuinely shook me. And, aside from the obvious, what struck me was this. It's easy to contemplate something when you don't have to think about it in reality. We all watch movies, hear stories, witness artworks, images, symbols, ideas; things that represent other things. But it's not until you're presented with something in the flesh, that you actually know what it's like or what it means. I have watched and written about a number of horror films, but it wasn't until I started placements in hospital chaplaincy, working in dementia care homes, ministering to the bereaved, or sitting up all night with people who were actually dying, that I realised more truly what this meant, when certain types of art were helpful or unhelpful, or even if artistic or other symbolic depictions of such experiences could ever be *that* helpful.

I say all this because I think this issue is a prevalent one in our culture, and the same thing applies to our faith. Art, symbols, diverse interpretations and perspectives on faith concepts can be very helpful for us to understand what these complex theological truths contain, and how we might dwell within them. The problem comes when we take the symbol and run with it, to the point where we begin to reflect only on the symbol, and not on what it means or where it comes from. This was what I encountered in the crypt; a person who had dressed as a piece of art he sought to witness, embodying something which, quite frankly, goes way beyond the comprehension of even the most skilled theologian, and probably not this sweet guy...

The same thing applies when *we* go to *church*. As you sit here now, think about all the things that happen in this liturgy; procession, gathering, confession, anthems, the Eucharist. Even simply bowing or genuflecting before the sacrament. All these

things mean something; they are not hollow, idle gestures; they are loaded with meaning, and communicate something of our and God's intention when we embody them. And I say "embody" because when we worship God it is not simply a performance (though there is some element of that to it), it is more than just a performance, we are *embodying* the very story, or rather *life* of God. Every word, action and movement means something, so we need to understand it, *purely and simply*. *Symbols are good, but they need to be simple and communicate clearly.*

That is why it is so important not to glaze over passages like the ones we've heard this morning. Isaiah says, "My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill... He expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes... And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard." Isaiah offers the imagery of a vineyard, beautifully prepared, yet which does not produce what it should. He describes what happens to it. It will be laid waste, trampled down. And when Isaiah explains why all this is happening, it is because the people joined from house to house, added field to field, developed and built and built, until there was no room for anyone or anything to grow anymore. No more room for meaning. No space for God to be known. It's like when we make more and more symbols and images for ourselves in the hope that we might understand something. But it doesn't bear true fruitfulness. We simply accumulate mass, add new layers, more symbols, ideas, but we don't find the sustenance we need, because we miss the true, simple point.

Then, we hear Matthew's Gospel. Again, it's not a pretty picture. Another vineyard is described, this time by Jesus; a landowner develops his plot, sends people to maintain it. And when the owner sends representatives to collect the harvest, those who mind the vineyard destroy them. A second group are sent in, and

again those who tend to the vineyard take them out of the way. Finally, the master's own son and heir is sent in, and the people, seeking after his inheritance, kill him. And Jesus says, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes." Those who accept Jesus will receive the Kingdom of God and bear it's fruitfulness, and those who reject Jesus, will not receive it.

Like Isaiah's vineyard, this vineyard is created by God for God's purpose, but it is not used in this way, and after a time simply becomes a means to other people's ends. A method by which people ignore God and seek their own gain, *adding what they want to it, and reject it's true meaning*. ***And the way we often read these vineyard images indicates the same thing.*** How often do we view these images, listen to Jesus' stories, and add meanings of our own, rather than accepting at face value what they really meant all along? That, I often find, is the point in Jesus' parables, the point of prophecy, the impact of scripture's meaning. We are given the message, with a helpful, simple image, so why can't we just accept it?

As I've said before, if each one of the evangelists had their own church, I would find it tough at Matthew's. Mark gives you the fine details, Luke the physician teaches the healing of the poor, John poetically and theologically reflects. But Matthew, writing indeed to the church, provides the theological kick up the "crypt passage" that we all really need. We can develop art and symbols, meanings and interpretations, but Jesus' stories aren't just about that, and neither are the words of the prophet. This isn't something you can lay more symbols upon, dress up, or even avoid by saying funny things in a sermon... It's real! Even a preacher struggles... *We need to just live it.*

So, Matthew gives us three things. First is the choice. You either choose Jesus or you choose something else. Second comes the consequence of our decision. If you choose Jesus, you get the Kingdom and it's fruitfulness, and if you don't then you get something else. And if you think this is simply judgmental preaching, then you need to know point number three. Why choose Jesus? Well, that's obvious. So the question is "Why not?" Why wouldn't you choose Jesus? And there lies the reason we dress up with symbols, often make the movements without necessarily dwelling in their deepest meaning, or hear the story but try to find a way around it. We're afraid. Afraid of what God has in store for us, no matter how good it could be it is still mystery and power, and we're also afraid of what will happen otherwise. And what's more we're afraid of each other, of what other people will think. Like the Pharisees, "they realised he was speaking about them, and so they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds." The Pharisees' dilemma is ours. We all want to chase Jesus down, get him to say it again, ask every question, sometimes we even want to arrest him, quieten the message, but we don't do either, we're just too afraid of what others will think.

So this is my prayer. In his Christmas sermon, Fr Stephen said the words "do not be afraid" had stuck with him through that season. And I have found that to be a meditation I've returned to throughout this year. This is what Jesus says, when you fear the crowds, when you fear arrest, when you try to avoid the message by loading up meanings and symbols until you can barely move from house to house, hear Jesus say those words, "Do not be afraid." When you worship today, think... when you bow, genuflect, approach the altar, pray, sing; do this as if your life humbly and simply depends on it. Because when we do that, we will leave this place transformed, and we will go out into the world and share that faith; and everyone will look and listen, and say, "Now I know why they go to church. *Is **Jesus** still here?*"

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Trinity 16  
October 5th 2014*