

An Enemy Hath Done Thisⁱ

Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan came also among them. (Job 2:1)

There are moments for all of us when the liberal, rational, humane categories we normally operate with suddenly collapse; sooner or later, we must all drive into the extermination camp and confront without illusion the most unbearable truth about what it is to be human, the truth that benevolence and rationality are not at the heart of people's actions. There is a "horror of great darkness" in our dealings with each other. Nor do we have to go to the camps to learn this, though they are the most appalling sacrament of it that we have seen for centuries: the record in our own lives is likely to be bleak enough. And when we see how swiftly and easily the edge of gratuitous cruelty slips into our well-intentioned, even our loving, transactions, we may echo William Golding: "People don't seem to be able to move without killing each other." Faced with the destructive fruits of what we have done as individuals - or as a whole civilization - it is not surprising that the cry springs to our lips, "An enemy hath done this."

"An enemy hath done this." Not I or we. How could we? This is not what we meant. How can I be responsible for what I did not mean? Yes, it is a child's cry, and it sounds so painfully like the child's evasion of responsibility - the refusal to be adult and accept the consequences of our actions. But perhaps there is more to it - another kind of maturity that understands that "responsibility" is not the last word about human behavior. This is a difficult thing to say convincingly, yet the Christian, with his or her perennial problem of understanding the relation of grace to freedom, is apparently stuck with the task of trying to say it. For human activity is misunderstood if it is seen as a sequence of "responsible" decisions taken by conscious and self-aware persons in control of their lives. More often it is a confused, partly conscious, partly instinctive response to the givenness of a world we do not dominate, a world of histories and ideas, languages and societies, structures we have not built. More perhaps than we ever realize or accept with our minds, we are being acted upon as much as acting. If our assumption of "responsibility" rests on belief that we can construct the patterns of our own lives, it is an illusion - not the child's evasiveness this time, but the infant's assumption of omnipotence. It is a hard lesson, this; we should all like to believe otherwise, but intentions are not enough. Reality is stronger. Our uncertainty about the degree of our

responsibility need not be cowardly or self-deceiving; it can be an honest acknowledgment of the way in which reality, even human and personal reality, resists the mind's desperate attempt to organize it reasonably.

The mind's *desperate* attempt: there's the rub. It is not at all comforting to recognize that we are not "in control," that incomprehensible forces are at work in and through us, involving us willy-nilly in a bewildering and horrifying chain of events. It seems to place us in that familiar situation of nightmares where everything is developing at great speed with a logic we cannot quite grasp and certainly cannot modify. Pushing these thoughts to their most extreme point: if we do not fully know what we have done, what we are doing, or what (worst of all) we may do - what is this but the condition we commonly call madness? If our reason is not "at the wheel" to unify and direct what we are and do, have we any unity at all in ourselves? Where is my soul? One of the worst threats one can feel is the sense that one's identity, one's particular and single being, is menaced; there is an unfamiliar presence in the home, a contradiction and a frustration, to trip us up, to catch us out, to twist our words, to bewilder and encircle us. "He has a devil": a *diabolos*, a maker of discord, an accusing presence because it mocks the mind's failure to bring the world - inner and outer - into order and meaning. And madness is the accuser's triumph, his coming into possession of the house, when the mind at last finds the contradictions insupportable.

The devil is not a convenient metaphor for extreme wickedness or even for the acute sense of meaninglessness. It may even be less of a mistake to think of him as a kind of person than to think of him as a kind of symbol. There is more than a "projection" here, more than an "externalization of inner conflicts"; in some sense, we really do meet another, a stranger, not a symbol from our conscious imaginings, but something that waits for us. As Ivan Karamazov discovers in his terrifying encounter with an amiable middle-class, nineteenth-century liberal Satan, his most refined torture is the refusal to tell us clearly whether he is us or not; that is the torture which drives Ivan insane. As soon as the question, "Inside or outside?" "I or not I?" is put, we have capitulated to the enemy's terms. We have entered a game of spiritual tail-chasing, the conscious mind frantically trying to close its teeth on a mockingly elusive shadow. We cannot rationalize it away by saying either, "I am the victim of a totally independent superhuman power" or "I am discovering the untapped resources of my individual psyche." The intolerable fact is that we meet the really alien in what is really human: if that is not so, the scriptural "mystery of iniquity" ceases to be mysterious.

How then shall we be saved? How are our lives to be preserved from disintegration and senselessness? There will be no answer to such questions as long as we persist in looking for a unified picture of our lives that our consciousness can take in without any difficulty, as long as we think of our relationship to God primarily or actively as a matter of individual self-awareness coming to fulfillment and integration. As Augustine might have said, the only integration we can achieve in this life is the knowledge that we cannot achieve integration, and the fullest maturity is to know our immaturity. Forget this, and you are proposing another kind of justification by works, a righteousness of intelligibility, a situation in which the judging and forgiving Word of God must wait on the divided consciousness and the troubled conscience of men and women, and can enter only to solve the problems dictated by us. No: "I cannot of my own understanding. . . come to Jesus Christ my Lord" (*Luther's Small Catechism*). God "is found by those who do not put him to the test and manifests himself to those who do not distrust him" (Wisdom of Solomon 1:2). Faith is the spirit that confronts the divider, the maker of discord, and rejects the invitation to put the Lord to the test by seeking the rational, the unified, the intelligible pattern. To believe is to hear and accept the proclaiming of God's victorious compassion, the mercy that is more than our conscience and our consciousness; it is to be able to say, "Whatever is in me and in the human world, God has seen, known, and taken to himself in Jesus who descended into hell." Christ has conquered.

The language of the Christus Victor tradition is, in many ways, a better model for us than any theory that sees the atonement as bringing order and control into the world. It takes with full seriousness the uncontrolled and uncontrollable, the alien and the menacing in the world, and says not that Christ has obliterated them, but that Christ has overcome them. They are there still, but their horror is seen in a new perspective: the wounds they inflict are the prints of the nails in the body of the Lord. He has battled with the unintelligible dark, the *surd* of evil, and still lives. He contains evil, he has shown that evil cannot contain him: the darkness comprehended it not. He has looked into the "heart of darkness": he has held the burning world to himself, and holds it always, at the cost of a pain we cannot begin to conceive. "The Lord is King. . . be the earth never so unquiet." (Psalm 99:1)

"This have I done for my true love." Faith rests on a victory that has been won; it is not a task or work that must be achieved by us, however much it demands the daily struggle to renew and mature a response in every corner of

our lives. And in this context, does it matter where the devil dwells? The questions, "Inside or outside?"; "I or not I?" begin to seem insignificant, because the glorious victory of our Lord teaches us at once both the enormity, violence, and reality of Satan's power, and the truth that it is not final. Satan is the prince of this world; chaos and menace are the texture of our lives - yet the compassion of God encircles the whole. "It lasteth and ever shall because God loveth it." Can we now understand that our unity, integrity, wholeness, *salus, shalom* is not in us but in God-in-Christ, who is our peace? Any interest in the diabolical, any so-called expertise in demonology and the analysis of the dark and the absurd, is a failure in faith. If "exorcism" is ever anything more than the proclamation of God's victory and God's acceptance, if ever it becomes a matter of clinical technique, it has entered the conflict on the devil's terms, attempting to fight again the battle that Christ has won. No one will finally remove for us the risk of darkness, the influx of "black grace" in Iris Murdoch's memorable phrase - that inflates our hatreds and pushes even our loves into cruelty. All that can be done is, again and again, to refuse the temptation to rationalize, and turn to the compassionate Word of God. To dramatize and objectify the world's senseless evil is to yield to its undeniable magnetism and to swell its potential power; and it is destructive enough without that. But to know it as the wounds of Christ is to see without illusion: not the pain but the threat can be healed.

So Satan is among the children of God; he is not outside of the company of God's beloved, and his unpredictable working and uncontrollable power cannot break the bond by which the love of God holds us to him. Only we - the conscious and rational and self-determining we - can do that, because we alone can say "no" to God's acceptance; we alone, in our struggle for control and meaning for ourselves, can objectify and eternalize the discord, the horror, the destructiveness of the human world, since that world will never of itself yield the order we look for. We are not wrong to fear hell: it is constantly present as a possibility in what we do and think. We are *wrong* only if we *forget* that the one freedom that is assured to us, the only freedom that finally matters, is the capacity to say "yes" to God's great "yes" to us in Christ, and that no powers of darkness and chaos and evil can rob us of that without our consent.

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to

separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

ⁱ 17, Williams, Rowan. "An Enemy Hath Done This," in *A Ray of Darkness*, 75-75. Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1995.