



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

The Third Sunday after Epiphany: Overcome Evil with Good

Romans 12:16-21

Fr. William Klock

January 22, 2023

The theme of the Epiphany season is “manifestation”. In the Gospel lessons we read of Jesus the Messiah, made manifest to those gentile magi from the East; made manifest as the son of God, the representative of Israel, at his baptism; his mission made manifest in miracles: turning water into wine, calming the storm, casting out demons, healing the sick. Sunday after Sunday we see Jesus manifest as Lord and as Saviour and we see his kingdom, the kingdom he came to inaugurate, new creation, we see it manifest too: God’s new world breaking into the present age. But we can’t forget the Epistles we read on these Sundays, all taken from Paul’s letter to the Romans, from the twelfth and thirteenth chapters. They’ve been part of the lectionary for a millennium and a half and they, too, carry this theme of manifestation. But here it’s the *Church*, the people of God, who manifest Jesus and his kingdom as we live the life of the Spirit and of God’s kingdom in this overlap of the ages.

Think on that. In his death and resurrection, Jesus has inaugurated a new age, a new world, and he’s given his people and the world hope. He will make all things new. But making all things new and setting God’s Creation to rights also means that one day there will be a judgement and everything that opposes God and his new world will be wiped away. We see his graciousness and his patience on display in the fact that he sent his Son, not to bring an end to the story by destroying and wiping away

ungodliness, but by sending him into the middle of the story, to die for the sake of his enemies, in order to make a means of redemption. That judgement, that cleansing, that final annihilation of evil and rebellion, it *will* one day come. But Jesus first offers a way into his new world and a way out of the coming judgement. We saw a foretaste of it in our study of Revelation as judgement fell on Jerusalem. One day the same will happen on a cosmic scale. But in the meantime Jesus graciously offers an opportunity to be part of his new creation. We need only kneel in faith before him in acknowledgement that he is Creation’s true Lord. In return, he makes us his people and, in that, he forgives us and he makes us new. In our baptism he plunges us into his own Spirit and his Spirit then converts ungodly hearts set on rebellion, and places in them a love for God and a love for each other. He makes us heralds of his new creation and sends us out with his royal summons, to call men and women to repentance and to faith so that they, too, can have a share in his new world.

But the people and the powers and the institutions invested in the old age don’t like that. Jesus warned his friends: “A disciple is not greater than his master. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you.” Persecution is bound to happen whenever and wherever the old age and the new age meet. Paul knew this from personal experience. In fact, Paul had found himself on both sides of the clash. He knew what it was to be the persecutor and he knew what it was to be the persecuted. He knew that it was in this meeting of the ages, this place where the world and the kingdom come up against each other, that Jesus’ people find one of our greatest opportunities to be the people the Spirit has made us. This clash is the place where Christians have profound opportunity to live the gospel and to be and to manifest God’s new creation here and now.

As Western Christians we don’t know much about persecution. Not first-hand. We’ve read stories of brothers and sisters martyred in the days of the early Church or in modern times in China or the Soviet Union or the Middle East or of missionaries like Jim Elliot, but we haven’t experienced real persecution ourselves. We sometimes face opposition and hostility. The older I get the more I think that an awful lot of the “opposition” we face here in North America isn’t so much for being Christians; it’s for being jerks, which is just the opposite of what God’s grace should be making us. But that highlights what Paul is getting at in our Epistle today, in Romans 12:16-21. We’re continuing in this passage that began with Paul telling us to present ourselves as living sacrifices to God. To do that, he writes, is to worship the one who has saved us. He went on to explain what that looks like in practical terms. It begins with love and last Sunday we looked at his description of love at work in the Church. How we live with and treat each other is a profound witness to the world. In the Third Century, Tertullian wrote about the influence the Church had on the pagans around it. The pagans didn’t comment so much on what the Church taught or said, but on how the Church lived. In a world where mercy and grace were almost unheard of, the pagans saw Christians and were astounded, saying, “Look how they love each other!” Here in the Church we are a microcosm of God’s new creation. But Jesus doesn’t intend for us to keep it to ourselves. Just as God’s love spills out of us to each other, it then spills out of the Church to the world—and it often has its most profound impact when it comes up against opposition, hostility, and persecution. In these verses, Paul now carries this theme of love as he leads us out of the doors of the church and back to our neighbourhoods, workplaces, governments, and communities.

Paul knew first-hand the impact the love of Jesus can have when it comes

up against the world. What he writes here is not what he grew up with. What he writes here is the opposite of what characterised the Jewish world he knew. The Seventh Chapter of 2 Maccabees gives us an idea of the mindset that Paul was raised with. We don't have time to read the whole thing this morning, but the story takes place about 160 years before Jesus was born. A group of Jews under the leadership of Mattathias Maccabeus and his son, Judas, rose up against their Greek rulers. The Greeks tried to suppress the faith of the Jews. In 2 Maccabees 7 we read about a woman and her seven sons who were threatened with torture in an effort to force them to eat pork. They refused and, one by one, the sons were brutally tortured and killed for their refusal to compromise. Each, in turn, as he was tortured called down curses on those Greek soldiers and on Antiochus Epiphanes, the Greek king. They became national heroes, not just for refusing to compromise and eat pork, but mostly for having the courage to curse the soldiers as they were dying. The men who rose up to violently overthrow the Greeks in the revolt that came were national heroes and still are to this day. The Maccabees were the spiritual fathers of the Pharisees. They were heroes to Paul and Paul saw his opposition to the Church as being faithful to that heritage.

But something changed. It might have begun as Paul stood by while Stephen, the first martyr, was stoned. Stephen preached Jesus and the Jews killed him for it. Paul held coats so that those throwing stones wouldn't be encumbered. And he heard Stephen with his dying breath cry out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60). Just like Jesus, who was crucified, but did not curse or revile in return, but prayed, "Forgive them, for they know not what they are doing," Stephen prayed for his enemies. This was unheard of. But, years later, here's what Paul wrote in Romans 12—the end of our Epistle last week:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

Someone reviles you for your faith in Jesus. Bless them. Someone has your church's tax-exempt status revoked because of your witness for Jesus. Bless them. You're fined for refusing to compromise your faith as it relates to your business practices. Bless them. You're arrested and put in jail for proclaiming the good news about Jesus. Bless them. Bless them. Bless them. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Is that a hard thing to do? Of course it is. But do it anyway. Stephen knew that it was only by the grace of God he was different from those who killed him. He knew they needed that grace as much as he did. If Stephen used his last breath to pray for the people who were stoning him, so can you. And Stephen's story reminds us of the key here. Stephen had his sight fixed on Jesus and the Cross. Brothers and Sisters, you can't revile, curse, and fight back when you have your eyes fixed on the one who gave himself up as a sacrifice for the sins of his enemies and who preached, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). Epiphany reminds us of the manifestation of Jesus as Messiah, as Lord, as Saviour. You and I have experienced that manifestation and it changes everything.

And it's not just blessing the people who would persecute us for our faith. We're going to face hostility everywhere we turn in the world. The old age is filled with sin and corruption. Our interactions are tainted with it every day. But instead of seeing this as an opportunity to get back or get even, as people of God's new creation, we should look at our life in the midst of the world as a means of lifting the veil on the new creation that is our hope—and that Jesus and the Spirit have made us a part of already. Look at verses 15-16:

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.

That means: Don't be a crank. When something good happens to your pagan neighbour, be happy for him. When he throws a party to celebrate something, go and celebrate with him. When Veronica's brother got married it was by a druid priestess with a druid-Wiccan ceremony. We could have been grumps—and we weren't happy about the pagan stuff—but the fact is that marriage was instituted by God. Marriage is a good thing—even when the pagans do it. It's what men and women are supposed to do. It's a joyful time. We went. We politely declined the smudging and stood outside the "sacred circle" drawn by the priestess and didn't take part in the pagan rituals, but we could still rejoice with them in their marriage.

The flip side of this is that we ought to weep with our neighbours or with the world when it weeps. Some Christians are really, really good at Schadenfreude. They sit and smirk every time something bad happens to unbelievers. Brothers and Sisters, don't be like that. It's self-righteous to be like that. Bad things happen because we—*all of us*, every human being who has ever lived—have sinned and contributed to the corruption of our world. Sometimes we suffer as the consequence of our own personal sins. Much of the time we suffer the cumulative consequences of thousands and thousands of years of sins committed corporately by the entire human race. The problems of this world can be laid at our feet as much as anyone else's. We've all contributed and none of us has any business gloating at the misfortune of a fellow human being. But remember, too, that you and I are privileged to be stewards of the *answer* to human suffering. In Jesus and the Spirit, we've caught a glimpse

of the world set to rights. God, in his grace and mercy, saw fit to reach each of us with the good news about Jesus. We ought to show that same grace and mercy to others who suffer. Instead of gloating, we ought to take the good news about Jesus to them.

In fact, even though the world around us is hostile to the good news, Paul says “live in harmony with one another.” The Greek literally says, “thinking the same thing towards one another”. The sense is that Paul is calling us to live alongside our neighbours, sharing life with them. We Christians are prone to withdrawing from our neighbours. We may not go off and form literal ghettos where we all live in the same place apart from everyone else, although there have been some groups who have done that. Our failure is that we tend to minimize our association with non-Christians. That’s particularly true of those of us who have been raised in the Church. We tend to form all of our close relationship with fellow Christians. And then we wonder where all the opportunities for evangelism have gone! It’s good to ask yourself—particularly if you’ve been a Christian for a long time—if you’ve isolated yourself from non-Christians.

And Paul goes on and says not to be snobs, but to associate with the lowly. We see this lived out very dramatically in the Church of Paul’s day as slaves and free people lived alongside each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul, no doubt, had in mind the tensions between Jewish and Gentile Christians in the Roman churches. Those may not be the sorts of division we’re prone to being snobbish about today, but they make the point that the love of Jesus that has been poured into our hearts by the Spirit crosses boundaries of every kind.

Now look at verses 17 and 18:

Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Responding in kind is the way of the fallen human heart. It’s our most natural response. But the Christian is different. Again, the Spirit has removed our hearts of stone and in their places filled us with love for God and love for our neighbours. This is the most basic and fundamental characteristic of the Christian, which is why Paul beats this drum so often—he says almost exactly the same thing in 1 Thessalonians 5. Love does not seek revenge. Love seeks the best, even for our enemies. If you struggle with this—and we all do—remember, again, the cross. *We* rejected God. *We* sinned. *We* sundered heaven and earth. *We* corrupted God’s creation. But instead of repaying our evil with more evil, God sent his Son to forgive, to reconcile, and to restore. Why? Because he loves us. Think on the cross. Meditate on the cross. Keep the cross always at the centre of your vision and love will become easier and more natural.

And because of love and our desire to live out the good news and to manifest God’s new age in the midst of the world, we’ll always be thinking about how to do good. Paul knew that sometimes doing good and manifesting the kingdom will bring the scorn of the world. It took Jesus to the cross. But he also knew that it’s possible to live at peace with our neighbours. There are times when our integrity and refusal to compromise may lose us friends or get us fired from our jobs, but we can still rejoice with our joyful neighbours and weep with our weeping neighbours.

What comes to my mind as I read these words is that Paul understands that we will face the opposition of the world, but we should respond to that by being squeaky-clean. We should be living in such a way that when we

do face opposition or persecution, it should truly be for the sake of Jesus and *only* for the sake of Jesus. I think this is something we modern Christians need desperately to hear. We can be self-righteous jerks sometimes, all in the name of Jesus. We can be horrible snobs in the name of Jesus. We can be terrible cranks in the name of Jesus. We often gloat at the sufferings of unbelievers—particularly those who actively oppose us—and we gloat in the name of Jesus. We can be horrible, self-righteous hypocrites in the name of Jesus. And we too often seek our own welfare—often doing so in the name of Jesus—through associations with ungodliness and ungodly people. Politics, materialism, and consumerism have corrupted our gospel perspective and compromised our witness. We grasp for power. We grasp for things. We live for ourselves, forgetting our Lord, as Paul writes in Philippians, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

People call us haters and bigots because we refuse to bow to the sinful sexual ethics of the day and the identity politics of Postmodernism. Brothers and Sisters, our refusal to compromise will bring opposition, but we need to be sure that the opposition is truly for the sake of our commitment to Jesus and to the real love that Paul describes here. If the world is going to call us haters, we need to be squeaky-clean. We need to be the most loving people on the planet—as we should be—even if the world doesn’t fully understand true love. The people who are going to call us bigots for forsaking their false gods, need to see us rejoicing with those who rejoice, weeping with those who weep. They should never see us thinking more highly of ourselves than

we ought. To the contrary, they should see us seeking out the lowly. They should know, even if they've suppressed it in the backs of their minds and seared their own consciences, that their accusations are utterly false. This was the witness of the first Christians, many of whom were martyred for standing up to the gods and kings of the age, but who, by their loving, giving, and humble witness turned the Roman empire to Jesus.

Brothers and Sisters, Paul gives us a sombre warning in verse 19:

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."

This isn't always an easy thing to do, but, again, look to the cross. God's people are loved by him. That God would give his Son for our sake is the proof. We're Christians because we trust in God—in his goodness and his wisdom seen first and foremost in his provision for forgiveness and renewal through Jesus. Brothers and Sisters, *we know* that God is good. *We know* that God takes care of us. *We know* that God will set all things to rights in the end and that his justice will prevail. We don't need to take justice into our own hands by seeking vengeance. To do that is to perpetuate the very cycle of evil that Jesus died to end. Have you ever considered that your faith is witnessed to others when you choose to trust in God to deal with your enemies? Think on that the next time you're tempted to repay evil with evil.

Then in verses 20-21 Paul writes,

To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Instead of cursing our enemies, we need to devote ourselves, as Jesus said, to praying for them and seeking out ways to do good to those who persecute us. Paul quotes Proverbs 25:21-22. Don't just leave it at not taking vengeance on your enemy. Look for ways to actively do good to him or to her. This goes along with being squeaky-clean. Manifest the love of God to your enemy. There's some disagreement about exactly what Paul means by heaping coals on his head, but Paul's point seems to be this: First, doing good to your enemies is the right thing to do, because it models the gracious love that God has shown us in Jesus. Never forget that we were once God's enemies. Second, vengeance is God's prerogative and we need to trust in him in these situations. And, finally third, Paul's thinking that—even if it's a long-shot—loving our enemies may bring them to repentance. That may seem a stretch, but Paul knew this first-hand. Remember Stephen. Paul stood there holding coats for the stone-throwers. He heard Stephen's prayers for his enemies. Paul didn't change his mind about Jesus that day, but Stephen's witness stayed with him and was part of a long sequence of events that would eventually bring Paul to Jesus.

Paul really knew how evil is overcome, not with more evil, but with good. He'd seen it in his own experience. But he understood it, first and foremost, because of the cross of Jesus. Paul understood the way in which violence compounds violence and evil compounds evil, just as we do. Someone hits you so you hit back harder and the violence spirals. It's in our fallen nature and has been from the beginning. In Genesis 4 we're told of Lamech who boasted that a man hit him, so he retaliated by murdering the man. The world has been spiralling into greater violence ever since. Evil only begets more evil.

Brothers and Sisters, Jesus stepped into history to break that cycle. Evil concentrated itself in one place, rose

up to its full height, and did its worst at the cross. Peter drew his sword, but Jesus knew that evil begets evil, that those who live by the sword die by the sword. Jesus told Peter to put his sword away and then allowed himself to be led to the cross. Jesus let evil do its worst and in doing so, he broke the cycle. He returned death with life and evil with love. And now he's filled us with that same love and calls us to break the cycle wherever we find ourselves in it. It's not a question of if, but when. The spiral of evil and violence finds us every day, even if only in small ways. How do we respond? Brothers and Sisters, think on that. Focus your eyes on Jesus and his cross and meditate on his love.

Let us pray: Almighty and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities; and in all our dangers and necessities stretch out your right hand to help and defend us, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*