

# Overcoming Evil

Sermon by the Rev Daniel Costley - Sunday, 25 October 2020

Today, the 25<sup>th</sup> October 2020, is celebrated as Dasara in the Hindu faith tradition. Dasara comes at the end of 10 days of Navaratri.

The festivals are aligned, and celebrate the victory of good over evil. With different stories and emphasis across India and elsewhere, the imagery of the gods battling and the eventual triumph of good is an important one. This isn't a time when good easily vanquishes evil, it is instead a reminder that evil is powerful too, and that effort is required to overcome it.

One such story is from the Ramayana, one of the two major Sanskrit epics of Ancient India. In this story:

Ravana, who is the key protagonist in the Ramayana kidnaps Sita – who is the lead female and daughter of the Earth goddess. Rama, our hero, ask Ravana to release her, but Ravana refuses; the situation escalated and leads to war. Ravana loses and has to perform severe penance for ten thousand years,

However, once the penance was over, and having shown how good he can be, the Creator God Brahma decides that Ravana cannot be killed by gods, demons, or spirits.

Relishing this new found opportunity, Ravana returns to his old ways and rules as a demon king.

Eventually Lord Vishnu, the most important protector god incarnates as human, becoming Rama, to defeat and kill him. Ravana was protected from the gods, but not a human.

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Traditionally, Dasara is a celebration that brings millions to the streets for remembrance. The symbology is important too, and demonstrates an underlying and essential connection between daily living and religious faith. Hinduism is often referred to as a philosophy rather than a religion, for good reason, as the lessons demonstrated and experienced are integral to living a life considered worthy, rather than just something kept for Sunday – or whenever.

Although COVID will limit the possibilities this year, Dasara is a colourful festival, with enactments of the stories, the burning and destruction of the defeated gods representing evil, and the celebration of the gods representing good.

The importance of Dasara is not to claim good has vanquished evil for ever, but an understanding instead of the need to bear in mind the importance of good in our lives. The recognition that we too must be part of this drama – it is the human Rama that defeats Ravana, not the gods. It is the actions we take as humans that determine the victory of good or evil.

It is, as many festivals are, an annual event. We need to be reminded regularly of the message Dasara brings, and to stop and consider how we approach our actions and our approach to life.

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In our second reading, Stephen Shick's piece about Moses and the burning bush, we hear a similar story. The full story in Exodus is a lot longer than Stephen's neat summary, but key to it is that, having been sent up a mountain by his father, Moses turns to look at the wonder that is a burning bush that doesn't reduce, and then discovers it's a sign from God. He's turned, his attention is drawn, and God takes the opportunity to ask him to do good works. Specifically, for those that know their Bible stories, this is the moment where God asks Moses to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt.

Moses knows he should, but tries to get out of it. He's not thenman for the job, it's all going to go wrong. It's not going to be easy.

But God assures him that God will provide the support necessary– but it's got to be Moses that leads the people.

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This parallel of the holy requirement, the sacred need, for good and the rejection of evil, through the work of a human – or let's be real, a metaphor for all humanity – is key here.

Lord Vishnu becomes Rama, God requires Moses. There are of course other stories where God takes human form and being to bring relief to the oppressed and to fight evil.

Underlying all of this is a recognition that God alone cannot solve the ills of the world. Where there is darkness, it is for humankind to resolve for their fellow humans. No matter where you are on the religiosity spectrum, there is a need for personal engagement. God, or Vishnu in our story today, cannot stop the demonic king. Only you or I can do that.

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It was physicist Albert Einstein that said:

“The world is a dangerous place to live; not because of the people who are evil, but because of the people that don’t do anything about it”

He went on to say:

“The world will not be destroyed by those who do evil, but by those who watch them without doing anything.”

A call to the Rama and Moses within us all.

Yet these statements raise perhaps a further question within us. Why does the responsibility always rest with the good guys. Surely those that do evil are responsible in some way? Is the responsibility entirely on us to stop bad things happening? Isn’t the problem the bad guys, not the failure of the good guys.

Guys used in collective sense here, of course.

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I am not going to spend the next few weeks working through the philosophical issues around the ‘Problem of Evil’, as it is known. We don’t have time,

But in summary, the problem of evil from a faith perspective, especially a is trying to understand how an all-seeing, all-powerful God can allow evil and suffering to exist in the world. If your faith tells you there is a God that can do whatever he or she wishes to, then why would they allow evil to happen?

This is a particular issue for the monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam – one God, one all-that-is. Yet it contains both good and evil. Why?

For many Unitarians, Universalists and Unitarian Universalists, we have the get-out of course. For many, God isn't an omnipotent being, so it's completely reasonable that evil can exist. For those at the atheist end of the spectrum this gets even easier. No God, no reason why there shouldn't be any evil.

Sort of.

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The common answer from religious communities as to the existence of evil is the issue of free will. We, as humans, are able to make choices, we are able to determine our actions, we can decide what we might do in any given circumstance.

The idea of free will falls apart quite quickly once you start to look at surrounding circumstances, and the realisation that, in many if not most situations, there are very few, if any, options for you to take. Many of us in the privileged societies in which we live may have more choice than those with less opportunity or option, but the reality is there are only few places where there are fundamental differences in the possible choices we might make.

And these come down to the decision to do something that will hurt someone, or the decision not to do that. Or a decision to help someone, or the decision not to do that.

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I going to take a step back here and recall a song we used to sing at school. It was a Church of England school – many of them are here – and a song we sang quite regularly was called ‘Cross over the Road’.

I’m not going to attempt to sing it, but will quote a verse:

Would you walk by on the other side  
When someone called for aid?  
Would you walk by on the other side  
And would you be afraid?  
Cross over the road my friend,  
Ask the lord his strength to lend,  
His compassion has no end -  
Cross over the road.

There are several verses in this style throughout, and I can tell you now it is one that has stuck with generations of British schoolchildren. I wrote that verse down without the need for Google, and my daughters could too.

Based on the story of the Good Samaritan, it is a song that encourages us to help others in need. Not to ignore the plight of the hungry, the destitute, the homeless, the dispossessed. You’ve turned and seen the needy, you’ve turned and recognised someone or something that needs your assistance. You’ve turned and now, you know, there is no turning away.

Not to turn away and look at something else, but to turn and see the reality. To turn and see the calling you are given. To turn toward and not to turn away.

It’s what Moses recognised – he could not turn away, he had to follow that call for action.

And it aligns so well with Einstein’s point too – the true destruction is caused by those that do nothing in the face of evil.

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Yet there is more to it than that. We need to know why we must act in this way. To what end are we to bring a little suffering to ourselves in order to make life better for another, or for many others?

This is where Kathleen McTigue's piece rings so true for me.

You may recall from our first reading, the story of the Judgement of Solomon. The terrifying story of the baby who was to be cut in half and shared between two mothers.

The Biblical story ends the right way – the baby is saved and returned to its mother. However, as Kathleen explains, there is a need to know how that decision was taken, and whether Solomon acted simply in clever judgement, or whether he brought kindness to the equation.

This idea of kindness underlying our decisions is key. Being kind is the only way we know our actions might be for the best. Being kind is the way we avoid ignoring those that call for aid. Being kind is surely the guide we give ourselves in determining right action.

And none of this is easy.

Walking by on the other side is generally the easiest option when we see someone calling for help. Helping where there will be discomfort for ourselves, or we're just too damn tired, makes our decisions harder.

Yet we know deep down it is the right thing to do. We know that we must turn toward the issues, we know that it is only through human action – individually or in community – that human suffering can be relieved. We know that acting with kindness to friends, to family, to strangers is the only way we can help to overcome the existence of evil in this world.

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Dasara is the celebration of the victory of good over evil. A reminder that the human Rama was the only being able to overcome the apparently relentless and unstoppable evil in Ravana. Yet he was overcome.

The very human Moses too, was a conduit for God's message to his people, but it was through his actions and choices that the tribes of Israel found their freedom from slavery.

These stories and myths of faith traditions are meaningful and inspirational. In a time when there is so much uncertainty in the world – and in eight days time who knows which way the wind will be blowing us – but this is our moment not to cower and worry, but to reflect and draw on our deepest reserves to face the world with kindness.

Let us be the humans that bring the love of the all-that-is to the world. Let us be the generation that looked to overcome evil with kindness.