



N. T. Wright on the Problem of Evil

People still suppose that the world is basically a good place and that its problems are solvable by technology, education and development. This belief persists despite the horrific battles of Mons and the Somme during World War I, despite Auschwitz and Buchenwald.

The response to the events of 9/11 in the U.S. (and U.K.) was exactly the kind of knee-jerk lashing out which gets us nowhere. Terrorist acts are unmitigatedly evil. But the astonishing naivety which decreed that the U.S. was a pure, innocent victim, so that the world could be neatly divided up into evil people (particularly Arabs) and good people (Americans), and that the latter had a responsibility to punish the former, is a large-scale example of how we react to evil in immature and dangerous ways.

We are not told how and why there is radical evil within God's essentially good creation. One day I think we shall find out, but I believe we are incapable of understanding it at the moment. What we are promised, however, is that God will make a world in which all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well, a world in which forgiveness is one of the foundation stones and reconciliation is the cement which holds everything together.

The biblical story is about the messy way in which God has had to work to bring the world out of the mess—ever since the garden, ever since God's grief over Noah, ever since Babel and Abraham. Somehow, in a way we are inclined to find offensive, God has to get his boots muddy and, it seems, to get his hands bloody, to put the world back to rights.

The personified force of evil, "the satan," is important but not that important. It is wrong to think of the satan as "personal" in the same way that God or Jesus is "personal," which is not to say that it is a vague or nebulous force. I use the term "subpersonal" as a way of refusing to accord the satan the full dignity of personhood while recognizing that the concentration of activity can and does strike us very much like that which we associate with personhood.

We are called not just to understand the problem of evil and the justice of God, but also to be part of the solution to it. We are called to live between the cross and resurrection on the one hand and the new world on the other. We are called to bring the two together in prayer, holiness and action within the present world.

The church is never more in danger than when it sees itself as the solution-bearer and forgets that every day it must say, "Lord have mercy on me, a sinner"—even as it stands boldly before the world and its crazy empires. In particular it is a problem if and when a "Christian empire" seeks to impose its will dualistically on the world by labeling other parts of the world "evil" while seeing itself as the avenging army of God. That is more or less exactly what Jesus found in the Israel of his day.

We urgently need restorative justice, wherein the whole community is committed to naming evil for what it is and addressing and dealing with it by bringing together offender and victim, with their families and friends, to look hard and openly at what happened and agree on a way forward.