



1 November 2009
All Saints' Day
Choral Evensong
Genesis 3 vv. 1–13
Matthew 5 vv. 1–12

Suspicion

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In Verdi's opera 'Don Carlos' King Philip II of Spain, having accused his wife Elisabeth de Valois of adultery with his son, following the suggestion by his own mistress Princess Eboli, herself jealous that Carlos is in love with his stepmother rather than her, curses suspicion. His wife's response had been to plead her innocence, not for want of feeling for her stepson, she had after all been betrothed to the son before the father, but because she had been carefully exercising restraint, had been discouraging Carlos at every opportunity, and was manifestly not guilty as charged.

Such a dramatic cocktail is not unusual in drama, whether musical or not. We need think no further than Othello. Interestingly, in the case both of the Moor of Venice and of the King of Spain, their suspicion reveals more about themselves than the person they suspect.

This evening's Old Testament reading from the book Genesis is illustrated on the cover of your chapel booklet, even though I didn't suggest this particular lesson until after it had been printed. But this is coincidence, there is such a thing, and I don't suspect your Dean of being privy to my thoughts.

The serpent sows the seed of suspicion by suggesting that God is being economical with the truth in forbidding the fruit of this tree to his human creatures. The woman is persuaded. The man follows her lead – fascinating in itself in the light of subsequent Judaeo-Christian history.

The consequence is that they realize they are naked, which brings us back to sex, the cause of Philip and Othello's problems, and to my reason for suggesting that suspicion has become a deadly sin in our age. Philip and Othello were suspicious of their wives' fidelity but I want to lead us elsewhere.

There is currently quite a lot of discussion and disquiet about the further development of the law relating to the protection of vulnerable people in our society through the establishment of the Independent Safeguarding Authority. There has been some exaggeration of what is required, but spontaneity and informality in certain relationships has become increasingly constrained.

For example, for several years now, I have refused to see anyone under 16 unless another adult is present. I don't have any doubts that I can be trusted, but I don't want to make myself vulnerable to malicious accusation as a publicly gay person. In the process I've obviously become suspicious that somebody might make such an accusation and so the chicken and the egg spin in their all too familiar circle. The teaching profession at every level is already trying to cope with this situation. If an accusation is made, then the accused is suspended while an investigation is made.

No one can seriously suggest, given what has happened, both in terms of the incidence of abuse and the public awareness of it, it is more widespread than many of us ever thought possible, that no kind of statutory protection is needed, but I'm concerned that we've crossed a boundary: once an accusation has been made, people are considered guilty until their innocence is proved. And of course there is no smoke without fire, is there? But of course there can be, or at least the smoke is not coming from the fire of the accused, but of their accuser.

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I mentioned boundaries which conveniently brings me to my second illustration: The Border Agency, which now actively discourages people from coming to this country in the way application must be made and through the attitude of many of its staff.

Over 20 years as a parish priest in north London I am now incapable of surprise though not of anger.

A few years ago I was told by an immigration officer that the reason we were not given an answer to our request for information about the procedure following the final refusal of an asylum application made by a member of the congregation was that we might have encouraged him to disappear and colluded in him remaining in this country illegally. We had asked because, accepting the reality of the decision, we wanted to be able to try to arrange his safe return to his own country. We made this clear in the correspondence. Instead he was seized when he reported one day – he had always meticulously done what was required of him – deported within 48 hours, and, within 15 minutes of leaving the airport at his destination, was beaten unconscious, only surviving through the compassion of a doctor who found him.

A friend of my partner's from Azerbaijan, who has visited this country many times with her partner, himself British but working overseas, was stopped at Heathrow a few months ago, accused of deception and deported for 10 years with no right of appeal. She was interviewed by a single officer, no interpreter was offered and she was not allowed to contact anyone, although the officer had a hostile conversation with her partner. Her crime was that although she had a valid visa, it wasn't the correct one. Apparently she should have had a resident's visa as she was in a relationship, even though her partner, though a citizen, was not a resident, so she was not eligible to apply for one.

I'm not concerned so much with the detail in these illustrations as with the attitude they reveal, the way people are approached. One of the ironies about the Border Agency is that it has officials in British embassies and high commissions throughout the world, whilst behaving in many ways that undermine the purpose of diplomacy. Its officers seem increasingly to be working, perhaps are instructed to do so, on the assumption that most people applying for a visa are trying to deceive.

Something vital to a healthy human society is getting lost. In the gospels Jesus tells his disciples at one point that we should be as cunning as serpents but as gentle as doves, indicating a necessary balance between naivety and scepticism. If we treat people as innately untrustworthy and deceitful many of them will fulfil our expectations. That is not my understanding of original sin.

In Genesis, before the serpent enters the story, we are led to understand that creation is fundamentally good, fit for purpose, because it is of God. We are in danger of letting the Fall, whether a happy fault or not, to take over rather than encouraging people to believe in their potential for good, or even more, for love.

Throughout his ministry Jesus went to those who were beyond the pale, outcaste, or were excluded by the authorities of the day. He did so to enable them to come back into a proper healthier relationship with their contemporaries. He didn't tell them that it was all right to steal, bear false witness, kill or commit adultery, but helped them to understand that they needn't be the victims of their own behaviour. There was a way forward while they had life, witness the penitent thief on the cross.

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That's why I asked if we could have the Beatitudes as the New Testament reading. It's such a familiar passage and often associated with All Saints Day as an indication of holiness, but it remains challenging, markedly more so than the 10 Commandments Jesus goes on to enrich as the Sermon on the Mount, which begins with these Beatitudes, develops. If we hold these words up like a mirror to our world they become arrestingly counter cultural.

I don't believe that anyone who takes the 10 Beatitudes to heart could regard another person as irredeemably suspect, deceitful and untrustworthy. Instead such a believer is committed to making something creative out of each relationship in every situation we are given.