

A few weeks ago I began my Sunday homily by referring to the Lucy Letby case, the appalling details of which were all over the media, and which were typically being accompanied by the predictable use of the word 'evil' to describe not only Letby's actions but also the woman herself. I felt a need to comment on these terrible events, but also a responsibility, since my current role and my past working life have often required me to try and explain why people do what they do, and how it is that some people can commit the most shocking of crimes. I was mindful too of the fact that for many years, I was also a nurse.

That much at least, I have in common with Lucy Letby. It suits me to think that it's all I might have in common with her, but perhaps that's a little too simplistic? When confronted with something as incomprehensible as the murder of newborn babies, it can be easiest to avoid asking why a fellow human being could do something so dreadful, and rather to see them as being somehow different to us, different in a way that makes them sufficiently 'other' than us as to mean that we don't have to inhabit the same world that they do. And to assume that 'evil' is something that we are not possessed by, and that we don't have the capacity to outrage or horrify the world through our own actions. Because we wouldn't harm children, or allow them to be harmed. We can be sure of this, we believe, because despite all our flaws, we are better than that.

The Church teaches that the natural law – the knowledge of what is good and what is evil – is written on the heart of every human being, and that it is this law that is manifested in the dictates of conscience, which is our guide in everyday life as to what we should and should not do. *Guide*, not dictator. Most of us don't get through a single day without telling our consciences to be quiet and leave us alone at least once. But if we don't always do what is right, we may at least know that what we are doing is wrong, and the discomfort of having knowingly done wrong is sometimes enough to discourage us from doing it again. And in many cases, the prospect of that discomfort will indeed stop us from engaging in wrongful behaviours in the first instance, because we know just how wrong they are, and how unable we would be to live with the guilt of having committed such actions.

I recall a conversation with a colleague who worked with violent offenders, and was describing to him a time when I was so incandescently angry with a client that I felt a wave of aggression rising within me to the extent that I had to consciously suppress it, and deal with it later in professional supervision. He replied that many of the people he encountered in his clinical practice instead would embrace these kinds of feelings and act them out, and for a brief moment I entertained the idea that there were two kinds of people – those who chose to reject harmful impulses, and those who don't, that some people are 'good', and some are 'evil.' But immediately it didn't seem that it could really be that simple, and it still seems to me now that it can't be, because if it was true, then our lives would be foregone conclusions, and we couldn't choose to be anything other than what we already are, or to do anything other than more of what we have already done. And there would be two human races, us (good, of course) and the 'others,' who are evil.

Scripture teaches us that we are made in God's image as rational beings, male and female, with a great capacity for promoting the good, a capacity that comes from God. And as history shows – the history of the world and our own personal history – also with a great capacity for evil, which is not of God. Life is a struggle, and even with a healthy conscience (and the Church acknowledges that many factors can lead to the development of a malformed conscience) it can be difficult to know how to act in a given situation, what decision to make, what will promote the good. And yet we live in a sociopolitical milieu that seems to delight in

denying that this struggle exists, instead encouraging black-and-white thinking by telling us that we, our community, our kind, are good, and right, and deserving; but the ‘others’, who are bad, and wrong, are not, and that more than this, it is their own fault that they are undeserving, because they are obviously, plainly, *not like us*.

This can be represented by the gap between rich and poor, or the majority and the minority, or Christians and non-Christians, or those born amongst us and those from somewhere else, but it is always the same message of intolerance of difference, difference that is real or imagined. And it can lead us to disregard the needs of those who are not like us, to disregard in a manner that permits real harm – real harm, *even to children*. Think of the images of suffering children, in war zones, in nations blighted by famine and disaster or climate change, in small boats heading to our borders, that the media place before us on a daily basis. It’s as though often we don’t care, or at least don’t care enough, to try and do more to end that suffering and to bring those children to safety.

But – we believe that we are better than that, don’t we?

I mean, we’re not like Lucy Letby. She’s evil.

Yes, I know. It’s not the same thing, because we don’t usually intend to be the cause of people’s suffering, especially that of children. Our sin is one of omission, not commission., because we don’t typically want ‘the others,’ be they children or adults, to suffer. But are we doing enough to bring that suffering to an end? Do our actions and our prayers reflect our beliefs and our desires to do no evil or at least not to allow others to do it when we can at least try to stop them?

Ultimately, these are not questions that anyone else can answer for us. We must decide for ourselves. But maybe the voice of conscience can help – if we are brave enough to really listen to it when it speaks. Without it, we can still be wrong, and very wrong, even if we’re not and never will be a criminal like Lucy Letby.