



In this morning's Old Testament reading, Isaiah says, "*Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together!*"

It takes determination to stand up for what you believe; it requires courage to contend in the face of opposition. In our democratic society where we have freedom of choice, there are usually two sides to every issue, and no matter what choice we make, someone will be offended. Taking a stand implies someone will be against us.

Jesus made his choices and he offended many people; there were people who opposed his choices. Jesus knew it was his mission to undergo great suffering, face rejection by the religious leaders, and then endure a gruesome death. But it was his choice to see that mission through to the end so that all humanity may fully know the truth about the Kingdom of God.

In his confusion, Peter thought this was a bad choice to make, marching on to crucifixion, and Jesus rebuked him, famously saying in this morning's gospel "Get behind me, Satan!"

Funny old word, 'Satan'. Over the centuries it has acquired a wide variety of names and meanings, and can carry a heavy load of baggage. 'Satan' is a Hebrew word meaning 'adversary' as in public prosecutor. Satan originally was a member of God's royal court whose duty it was to bring charges against humans for God the King to adjudicate.

In time this metaphor became influenced by Persian theology with its belief that the universe is controlled by two conflicting powers, the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Satan, populated by either angels or demons.

As Judaism entered the Greek world, 'Satan' became 'the devil' [*diabolos*] and then acquired a lot of other different names that pop up now in horror movies. With these changes Satan moved from being an accuser to being a tempter, opposed to God's purposes for humanity, urging us to change sides and turn away from God's Kingdom.

And then it all gets a bit crazy and metaphors become imagined reality and we choose to believe in the gospel of John Milton, not that of Jesus. We can now offload our bad choices by saying that 'the Devil made me do it'.

I choose to think of Satan like Jesus did, that inner temptation to choose the wrong direction, to make an easy choice. Freud called it the 'Id', the mindless instinctive impulse that chooses to prefer one's own personal welfare and desires over the needs of our neighbours. Job [7:18] shouts to God, "*What is man that you test him every moment?*" and we now pray, lead us not into temptation but deliver us from doing evil.

We cannot escape the reality of a world of choices, but *not* choosing is a choice in itself, one that may mean unjust systems continue without change. When I'm inclined to take the path of least resistance, I find courage in those willing to stand with me, believing together with all our hearts in a God who will not turn her back on those in need.

Who will you contend with today? Who will stand with you?