

The Sin of the Cross

I once knew of a woman who wouldn't come to church on Palm Sunday – because she couldn't stand to being asked to shout "Crucify Him". She said it was offensive to her, such sentiments were alien to her and beyond the realm of possibility for her. She missed the whole point

Scripture is clear that human beings in the archetypal Adam and Eve were created to live for ever with God – no liver spots, no wrinkles, no sagging skin, because they ate from the tree of life. Born for loving relation with one another and God. But the fact is we die, so what happened? Genesis tells us sin happened, that another love crept in and took over that love for God and one another. The love that stealthily crept in was self-love, relentless, voracious self-love; that satisfaction of one's desires by any means, at whatever cost to others, at any cost to those relations we were born to inhabit in love. In short, sin happened, that disposition, that turning within our desires, within our behaviours which produces sins.

Our society has a big problem with sin. It can seem like it attacks the sacred cows of self-esteem, non-judgementalism and the freedom of self-creation, a pessimistic take on human nature which actually, for the most part the modern story goes, is good, moral and just. Oh yeah? I don't think one has to look very far to see the prevalence of sin in our world. Try the papers, try driving, try discussing whose responsible for coronavirus. Or more widely, if the modern story is accurate then why don't we have peace instead of war? Why don't we have racial harmony instead of racial animosity? Why are children poor, abused, neglected, malnourished, sick from drinking bad water? Sin...generating a cycle of selfishness, rapacity, indifference, greed and vengeance.

But still the modern story might retort, "you're too sweeping in suggesting we're all sin-ful, plenty of us are not".

Hmm, ask yourself "what humiliates me?" This goes on being a relevant question for where we experience humiliation is exactly where we are most invested in ourselves. We want control. We want to be our own creators and the shapers of our own destiny. The self-assertive rage that lies at the heart of sin is resentment about being created out of nothing. The nothingness of our origins haunts us...indeed there is something frightening about our radical dependency on the love and grace of God towards us. We need to look long and hard at that disposition to sin and that is about something deeper than totting up the triviality of our misdemeanours relative to those in the papers. No, the way to look long and hard at that disposition to sin is by reflecting upon the meagreness of our loving, its thinness, its superficiality.

Another reason our society has a problem with sin is that human self-betterment is a major theme in our culture. The advice we get is "you need to make better choices", "you need to get your act together". We appeal to our rational minds, our wills. (*Whisper*) It doesn't work. But that fact doesn't seem to bother anyone. The advice columns, pep talks, self-help books and the sermons just keep coming. The reality of the human condition is that for the most part we cannot control ourselves or make good choices. At least not when it counts. It's a picture of humanity we wish were untrue. But it's reality. Jesus in John 8 puts it like this "every one who commits sin is a slave to sin...so if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" John 8.34-36 Self-improvement can only take us so far because it takes place INSIDE the prison house of sin. What Jesus gives is deliverance from the prison altogether, with a new life to go with it. The primary meaning of freedom in the NT is not freedom to do

whatever we choose. Rather it is freedom from the bondage to sin – freedom from everything that separates us from God.

The paradoxical heart of the cross in relation to this is that the one who is without sin all his life enters its prison-house, and springs the lock. In the Passion of Matthew the high priest says to the people: “You have heard his blasphemy. What is your judgement?” (Mt 26.65-66). And the people – you and I – shout “He is deserving of death”. That’s what we tend to say isn’t it, “he got what he deserved”? But what does the cross say? The Cross says that the One person who didn’t deserve to be crucified is the One who was. And the Cross says something else. It says “It should have been us instead of Him”. This is what is meant by that old phrase “the Great Exchange”. Unpalatable as it is for our self-congratulatory and can do world, sin is too strong for us. We need help in our sin.

To return to the beginning, we kid ourselves if we imagine we are not the ones who shout “crucify”, we most certainly are. Which is why as Christians we do not say “He deserved it”; Christians say, “there but for the grace of God go I”. When we truly understand this, when it sinks into our hearts, we will never want to see another human being humiliated. We will never want to see another person get exactly what he or she deserves.

May we think deeply upon this as we sing our next hymn and make these words our own;

Therefore kind Jesus, since I cannot pay thee,

I do adore thee, and will ever pray thee,

Think on thy pity, and thy love unswerving,

Not my deserving.