

## **The Shame of the Cross**

One of the most fatuous sentences ever written was “love means never having to say you’re sorry”. O contraire, love often requires being sorry, ashamed even and seeking forgiveness. Being ashamed of one’s conduct and admitting it is a sign of strength and character. It is a step towards growth and maturity. King David demonstrated this unforgettably when confronted by Nathan the prophet about his conduct with Bathsheba. David confessed his sin and shame instantly, no dissembling, no self-pity, no excuses. This it seems to me is shame brought to good issue.

But there is shame too that can issue simply in profound damage rather than growth. A little boy was sent home one day with a note pinned on his coat saying “Thomas is too dumb to learn. School is a waste for him”. His name was Thomas Edison, inventor of the light bulb. Despite the irony of this, the picture is distressing and nothing good can come of shaming a child in such a way. Shame like this is clearly a bad thing.

And shame is so powerful because it affects us so intimately. It is there for example in the story of Adam and Eve, shame at their nakedness. We will do everything we can to cover up our vulnerability, our sensitive and fragile condition. And human beings will cruelly exploit this vulnerability. Think of the military use of shame in the systematic rape of women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, whether in Myanmar, Kashmir, Sudan, Iraq or Eastern Congo; Eastern Congo where 12% of women have been raped at least once, 48 women were being raped every hour at one stage including the gang rape of young girls and women. Photographs show women hanging their heads in shame. Husbands often abandon such women, because they are ashamed, not so much of the women as such but ashamed of their inability to provide protection. Such shame erodes confidence, dignity and even the sense we have of ourselves. And can lead to self-annihilation.

Shame is a significant element in the crucifixion of Jesus. Heb 12.2, “looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame”. And Is 50.6, “I gave my back to the smiters...I hid not my face from shame and spitting”.

In relation to this its important to recall that crucifixion was a different way of executing people from other ways of putting them to death. Unlike the clean efficacy of beheading or hanging, the point of crucifixion was that it was meant not just to deter but to degrade. No other method has ever matched it in terms of public disgust; that was its express purpose. When a sceptical friend suggested to me that the crucifixion isn’t that bad, after all it was only 3 hours and plenty of people historically have died even more horrible deaths of protracted suffering, I think he missed the point. The cross is about utter contempt – it’s not about length of suffering or maximising pain – it’s about reducing the crucified to subhuman status – it is impossible for a crucified victim to be dignified or heroic no matter what some art suggests – the completely joint-wrenching, exposed, powerless, naked, breathless dehumanising ghastliness was what it was about. But notice the NT writers do not draw attention to the physical particulars of Jesus’ crucifixion – but they do call attention to the shame – underlined by the spitting, the derision, the placement between two low-life thieves, the godforsakenness. The placard over Jesus’ head might just as well have read “not fit to live”.

It's important to register that Jesus consciously, deliberately, voluntarily stepped into the place of utmost humiliation, he "disregarded the shame". The only person who in his whole life never had anything to be ashamed of, yet made himself helpless in order to undergo this worst form of disgrace and abandonment. There was no level of our shame that he did not experience, that he did not soak up.

It would be too glib to suggest that because Jesus endured such shame we are free of shame – it's not only glib, but experientially untrue – we still feel the sharp stab of shame. Shame bites deep – it bit deep into Judas, who hangs himself at the shame of his betrayal. Nevertheless there is in the crucifixion quite clearly a sense in which Jesus soaked up in himself the most shameful actions of human beings and the most shaming of deaths and that somehow this invites us to live in and with Him unburdened of shame. We see this invitation taken up by Paul who could have been paralysed by his shameful killing of Christians as Saul but whose transformation included an amazing endurance of all sorts of humiliations gladly and robustly borne. Or Peter who in an honour culture could have been destroyed by his shameful denial, abandonment and flight from Jesus, but instead takes up, slowly and imperfectly, a glad following.

We can now wear shame as Paul did, as Peter did, as King David did; able to stand looking up not down, able to say "I'm sorry", "I was wrong", "my bad", without being crushed, able to quietly turn humiliation into courage, able to fall down and get up, fall down and get up. This is a strange world to live out of, it is another world, but it is this world as ruled by our humiliated, precious Lord.