

Christian Morality...

This is the last in the series on *Christian Basics*. I have tried to say something about God, about the Bible and last week the Sacraments. Today, a few thoughts about what we are supposed to *do*. How should we live in the knowledge of the love of God, nurtured by his word and Sacraments? In other words, Christian morality. Well, I suppose you know the story of the chap who asks an Irishman how to get to Donegal. And the Irishman replies, *Well I wouldn't start from here*. In thinking of Christian morality too we have to start from the right place. If we're talking about what we *ought* to do, then we must begin by knowing what we *are able* to do.

We start with the fact of sin then. I'm going to talk about sin. Mortal sin. Original Sin. I shall need to talk about sin for the whole sermon. But I will try to make what I say palatable. Where better to start than with listening to the *Woman's Hour* phone-in – as my custom is? The subject was people eating too much and getting fat. Except of course it couldn't possibly be put like that. The fashionable word *obesity* was all the talk. Getting fat – sorry *obesity* – was described with horror as if it were some appalling calamity that can strike you down any minute – like a thunderbolt. The first caller set the scene for the whole programme. She was, I must say, very enlightened. That is, she knew that *she herself* was the reason for her obesity. But I was astonished at what she said next. She said, *I know it's eating too much that piles on the pounds. What I want to know is why, when I know this all too well, I still go on overeating?*

Original Sin, darling, that's why. St Paul could have told you – in words of one syllable what the presenters of *Woman's Hour* daren't tell you. *The thing you want to do, you can't do; and the other thing you don't want to do, you're doing it all the time.*

But don't run away with the idea that ignorance of the reality of Original Sin is restricted to the two or two hundred fat ladies who telephone *Woman's Hour* in their distress. This ignorance is all over the place. Let me give some examples. A boy was stabbed to death at school by a fellow pupil. His mother, understandably driven mad by grief, campaigned for new rules and laws so that, as she said, *This sort of tragedy can never happen again*. She was angry when these new rules and laws were not implemented. What she didn't understand was that *no* new rules and laws could prevent another murder. For it is no use, as T.S. Eliot warned us, *dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good*.

I'm going to labour this point because so many people seem to have difficulty grasping it. The other week there were huge memorials of Auschwitz and I lost count of how many times I heard politicians, radio and television interviewers say that everyone must know what went on in that genocide *so that it never happens again*. Are they crazy? Blind? It *has* happened again scores of times. Millions slaughtered in Rwanda. And in Cambodia by Pol Pot. It is happening now in Sudan. And, terrible though it is to contemplate, it will happen again.

There is a foolish idea – that by *knowing* something is wrong we can stop ourselves *doing* it. *Knowledge* is not in charge here. *The will* – the human will – is in charge. Or do we learn nothing from the Bible? Adam and Eve had *knowledge* of good and evil –

but it didn't stop their original disobedience. Perhaps we should imagine Eve on the phone to *Woman's Hour*: *I've had this terrible trouble with my husband and that apple. I know I shouldn't have given him it – so I can't think why I did it!*

Whether we want to get to Donegal or get to heaven, this is where we start from. The fact of Original Sin. And it's not just about getting fat, or even only about shooting your schoolmates or perpetrating genocide. The reality is much more squalid than that. Sin is, as Thomas Aquinas said, *banal*. It is a hideous caricature of virtue. Original Sin is always tawdry and sordid and it offers no rewards. It simply mocks us. Let me give you an example of Original Sin right here in the City...

By accident I've been exposed recently to the doings – sorry, that sounds like a line from Frankie Howerd - of some who crave senior positions in the City. What infantile machinations some contrive in order to get the ascendancy. You look at some of them and you think, *Good grief – these who would be princes among men with all their regalia and oaths would shoot their fellows in the back or poison their soup for the coveted place at the right banquet!* And even as I speak I can hear in my diseased imagination any one of a number of those sort admonishing me, *I say, old boy, that's not the sort of thing we expect to hear in a sermon!*

Lust and covetousness – I should mention covetousness and lust. I used to lust after being Rector of St Michael's, Cornhill. And look where that got me!

Sin is not usually genocide or only fat women on the wireless. Sin is insidious and deceptive – because the Devil is the Father of Lies. It is there in tiny acts of envy and resentment that grow until we are consumed by them. It is there in mean-spirited gestures and little excursions of selfishness. It alters people's faces and turns smiles into snarls and sneers: or just the perpetual face like a wet week. It is there in laziness and neglect too. For don't forget that as well as doing the things we ought not to do, we leave undone the things we ought to do. Sin comes with a polite smile, dressed in the proper trousers and wearing the right badges, observing all the courtesies. As George Eliot said of a refined lady, *She does her malevolence gently.*

Despite the Bible, the Church fathers, the mystical theologians and all the sermons you could hope to sleep through, people still do not understand that Christian morality does not begin with goodness: it begins with evil. But we persist in thinking that the gospel says we must be good. It doesn't. It begins – and ends, incidentally – by telling us that we're very bad, but that we can be forgiven. We won't believe that glorious fact. We prefer instead to believe in our own capacity for goodness, in our moral rectitude. But if we're good, why did we need a Saviour who had to be crucified? Don't phone *Woman's Hour*. Phone William Blake who answers *If moral virtue was Christianity, Christ's pretensions were all vanity.*

When I was a little boy I was tortured by a fiery evangelical Sunday School Superintendent who used to bang on about something called *the unforgivable sin*. Of course, I thought I must have committed it. But the unforgivable sin is easy to identify: it is simply the refusal to admit that we are sinners. And because we can't bring ourselves to admit our sin, it can never be forgiven. If you're convinced you're in the right, you can't stop yourself going wrong. *Evil thou art my good* – that is the unforgivable sin. The only unforgivable sin is the refusal to own up and to carry on

believing in our own moral uprightness. These believers in their own virtue were the ones Our Lord loathed, lost his temper over and took a whip to – *certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others.... Blind guides... whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones and of all uncleanness.*

Well, I've kept my promise and filled the whole sermon with sin. So where's the good news then? What's the remedy? The remedy is plain and, just so we get it, it is proclaimed majestically in the Old Testament and in the New Testament:

He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us: but if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us all our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Go on then – do it!