

On these Sundays in January I'd like to outline the plan of salvation which is given us in the Bible and developed by the Church Fathers and the great theologians. There *is* a plan and it is not like a modern novel – it has a beginning, a middle and an end. And it makes definite and complete sense. It begins with those magnificent opening verses in *The Book of Genesis* which describe the Creation. What is stressed there, time after time, is that God saw his handiwork and saw that it was good. So where did things go wrong?

The story in *Genesis* chapter three tells us that the woman was tempted by the serpent and that, after her fall from grace, she provoked the man to sin also. We need to get one thing clear from the start. The story of the Fall of Man is *a story*. What it tells us is true, but it is not true in the way that the weather report or the history of the kings of England are true. There are ways of communicating truth and literal-mindedness is not the only way. Look – if I take a photograph from my wallet and say, *This is my wife*, then I am speaking the truth and you know what I mean: but it's not the literal truth.

The origin of evil is a great mystery and the Bible presents it to us in a series of dramatic stories. Why did Adam fall? He was tempted by Eve. How did Eve fall? She was tempted by the serpent. How did the serpent fall? Here and there in the Bible – in *the prophet Isaiah, St John's Gospel and The Revelation of St John the Divine* – there are dark hints and allusions to fallen angels, Lucifer, the Devil. Again these are *stories* and what they are telling us is that things went wrong cosmically.

We need to get another thing straight: the Bible nowhere says that God and the Devil are equal and opposite powers. God made everything and saw it was good. If there is an actual character, the Devil, then God made him too. And the story goes that the Devil rebelled against God and God's goodness. As Milton put it, he would rather *rule in hell than serve in heaven*. Personally, I am with the Bible and Milton – and Dante and St Augustine – on this. I have no difficulty in believing in angels and in the Devil and the other fallen angels.

Others regard these stories as myths, parables and allegories. Perhaps that doesn't matter very much. The main point to understand – and it is crucial, which is why I'm labouring it so heavily – is that evil entered the world by acts of disobedience on the part of creatures made by the good God.

Now let's leave the stories behind for a bit and look at the facts. People can dismiss talk of angels and devils, of serpents, Adam and Eve, as myths quite easily. But people cannot deny the facts. Oh yes, they can! If you look at the world today, you will see a great deal of kindness, unselfishness, self-sacrifice, courage, generosity and all the other virtues. You will also see a great deal of cruelty, greed, selfishness, criminal violence and sheer wickedness. The picture we have is of human beings as half golden, but half rotten. The tendency of our time is to admire what is golden in us but to deny the rottenness. That is to deny Original Sin.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century is described as the era of progress and yes, there was technological progress. But there is nothing morally good or bad about technology. All our

inventions can be used for good or ill. The 20<sup>th</sup> century an era of moral progress? It was the century in which we produced the most devastating wars in history: more people killed, maimed and made homeless in the wars of the last century than in all the wars there had ever been. Think next of the corruption of human nature and human appetites which we see in faithless and indiscriminate sexual activity. The act of sexual coupling by which a man shall cleave to his wife and they become one flesh debased into something that is part of the leisure and entertainments industry. And made yet more vile by the fact that abortion is used a way to disguise this brute fact – and on a scale which murders 200,000 unborn children every year in Britain alone.

Sin is not just fornication. Look at intellectual depravity. Look at the way millions deny God's gifts of reason and intelligence and how we are so dumbed down. God invites us to join him in the work of creativity, and what do we create? Yes, there is Bach and there is Shakespeare and a large company of competent writers, musicians and artists.

But the good work is driven out by the bad – by the raucous bedlam of so much so-called popular music, the violence and cruelty of rap music; the insane new criteria in art which say that an artwork is anything anyone says it is – an unmade bed, a light bulb flickering on and off, Duchamp's urinal, pickled fish. What price western civilisation when the cultural commissars in the newspapers and mainstream radio and television do not allow us to discriminate between quality and rubbish – on the grounds that if you suggest Beethoven is better than the latest gaudy oik making a noise at what is hideously described as a *concert* in Hyde Park, then you are dismissed as *elitist*. I'm proud to be an elitist and so should we all. What's the alternative – to be a mediocratist?. The knock on effect of our philistinism – our refusal to discriminate - is that our children are no longer educated properly. This is a form of child-abuse.

But you don't even need to look so far as wars, wholesale sexual immorality and cultural depravity to notice that we have actually gone wrong and we might as well describe this going wrong as *sin*. Just a moment's inspection of your own motives will do the trick. It's called by the church *self-examination*. How often do we act out of petty selfishness, avarice, self-interest, deceit, idleness, taking the easy way out? How often as Eliot says we are guilty of *things ill done and done to others' harm*.

It's all put in the simplest, clearest terms by The Prayer Book: *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us*. But that's exactly what we do. The worst aspect of Original Sin is that we deny it. Modern types get offended when you tell them they're less than perfect. Everywhere is elevated the monstrous idol of self-esteem. People are said to suffer from low self-esteem. But *myself* is the one thing I am not supposed to esteem. Educationists, magazine editors, psychologists and psychiatrists promote and encourage self-esteem – that is to say narcissism and self-worship.

You think I'm laying this on a bit thick? Let's have examples then. People are no longer plain greedy – have you noticed? They are victims in *an obesity epidemic* – as if the reason you're fat is all the fault of the chocolate and chips. Nobody merely drinks too much: they have *a drink problem*. Children are no longer naughty. They *suffer from attention deficit hyperactivity disorder*. Personal moral responsibility – along with sin and evil – are just medicalised out of existence. Especially criminals

are described as *victims*. A couple of years ago a young lout murdered his parents for their money and ran off to live in a luxury hotel in New York with his girlfriend. When he was brought to court, the psychiatric reports said he was *suffering from narcissistic personality disorder*. He was probably suffering from low self-esteem as well.

You may not perhaps believe in a personal Devil, but you cannot deny that human beings can take on the role of the Devil and do his work quite expertly. And what is the Devil's work? It is the revaluation of all values. The Devil's job is simply to say *Evil, be thou my good*. And we are only too happy to do this work for him. Now the most terrifying aspect of actual evil and wickedness was pointed out by the profound philosopher R.G. Collingwood who described evil as *a barbarism*. And he showed us the shocking and horrible truth about all barbarisms: a barbarism is not just the enemy of civilisation; it is also enemy to itself. Our Lord had told us long before: *If the Devil be divided against himself, how shall his kingdom stand*.

This is the moral chaos we see as we venture into our town centres. Chaos and moral squalor. Mindless violence and every form of self-indulgence imaginable. Feral gangs armed to the teeth. Twenty-seven children murdered in London alone last year – that's more than one a fortnight. Binge drinking and drugging rife. Human beings degraded and trafficked into mere instruments of depraved pleasure. It requires a Hogarth to draw the scene. The same depravity – self-esteem - is also found in our own hearts

These are the facts and we remain in denial, preferring our progress and our self-esteem. This then is the Fall of Man. Next week I shall return to the story and try to say what God decided to do about it.