

On my weekend off I was sitting in a bar in Salisbury when a sort of contradictory phrase unaccountably leapt into my mind: *responsible drinking*. I can't think why this happened: it just did. But it set me off on a train of thought involving other combinations of words which appear contradictory. For example: *popular music; state education; mobile phone conversation; silent coach; military intelligence; socialist worker; women priests; Facebook friend; media personality; reality television; adult movie; English football*. You get the idea? By dinnertime, I had about fifty such contradictory phrases. In fact, it was becoming difficult to find a phrase which did not involve a contradiction. I toyed with the idea of making a new game out of this – like *Scrabble* or *Monopoly* – and applying for the patent, under the title *Oxymoron*.

But there are deeper currents here. Why is our vocabulary and syntax fractured in this way? Why is our language so full of contradictions? And the answer is because *we* are full of contradictions. St Paul defined our frustrating condition for us in words of one syllable when he said, *The thing I would, that I do not; and what I would not, that I do*. Unfortunately, this is exactly how it is with all of us. We make the same mistakes over and over again. There is a phrase for this too and it is *besetting sin*. Why do we seem compelled to do what we don't want to do, to shoot ourselves in the foot? Kierkegaard goes so far as to say, *Consciousness is a relation, a relation whose very form is contradiction*.

This means that human nature itself is contradictory. *Mary, Mary, quite contrary*. And the theological phrase for this is *Original Sin* – a phrase somewhat contradictory in itself, as there is very little that is original in most of our sinning. We should not usually think of sin as something particularly evil or macabre: it is mainly this frustrating inability to achieve what, when we imagine ourselves to be at our best, we really hope and wish for ourselves. One good thing that the former Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, did was to express this simply, the way we speak in the street. He said, *Original Sin is the buggeration factor*.

What can we do about this? Martin Luther said we should not even try to do anything about it – because we cannot. He went further. In a letter to Melancthon he said, *Sin boldly!* For Luther argued that, as *The Book of Common Prayer* Collect has it, *We have no power of ourselves to help ourselves*. If we could solve our existential crisis, abolish the buggeration factor and be good by the power of our own will, there would have been no need for Christ to come and sacrifice himself precisely to save us from our sins. William Blake put this most forcefully: *If moral virtue was Christianity, Christ's pretensions were all vanity*. Again: *The moral Christian is the cause of the unbeliever and his laws*.

This line of thought turns up again and again in Christian writings. Mother Julian said: *Sin is behovely, but all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well*. Whatever can that mean –

that sin is somehow a good thing, a blessing even? Yes, it comes close to meaning exactly that: for it is *because* of our sin that Christ came to save us. Many of the church's mystical theologians believed that before our Fall into sin we had a natural life, a little higher than the animals and lower than the angels. It was just this Fall into sin which, as it were, gave God the opportunity to raise us to a life far above this, life with God. Thus sin is called by the great Augustine, *Felix culpa, happy fault*

You will not be surprised to learn that this matter has always been controversial in the church. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century there were Pelagians – followers of the Celtic monk Pelagius – who said that it is our duty to strive, to try to be good, to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. The Pelagians were famously and energetically opposed by St Augustine who said that human nature is a *massa peccati*. A mess of sin from which we can be redeemed only by the grace of God. It seems outrageous to say that striving after moral improvement is useless. And this has always been the appeal of the Puritan insistence that we should at least *try* to be good, or try to be a little better than we are. The theological innards of all this I find fascinating, but what I really want to know is how does it work out practically in our lives, day by day.

It is possible for us to become better than we are, but we can only do this by the grace of God. But I'm still puzzled: what does *the grace of God* mean, what does it involve? It is two things: it is sacramental and it is devotional. The sacramental part is our baptism when, in the words of that rite, *I turn to Christ*. Or, if I am an infant, my godparents do this on my behalf. When I reach the age of discretion and I can begin to answer for myself, I take my godparents' promises on my own shoulders and I turn to Christ. But this is not satisfactory. How, if I have no power of myself to help myself, do I turn to Christ? What supplies the motive force if I am only, as Augustine says, *a mess of sin*?

The answer is simple and miraculous. It is Christ himself who enables us to turn to him. Again, in that lovely phrase from *The Book of Common Prayer*: *...by God's special grace preventing us*. And *preventing* in its old English meaning is *going before*. Christ goes before us. The theological phrase for this is *prevenient grace*. What it really means is that Christ nobbles our hearts. Christ is in Francis Thompson's words *the hound of heaven*, ready at any moment to pounce. He has only to notice the slightest flicker of remorse or compassion in us, the merest desire to turn, and he fills us with his grace which alone makes the turn possible.

How is even this slightest flicker, this merest desire possible in us when we are *a mess of sin*? Because we were made in the image of God. Original Sin constantly obscures this image and hides it from our sight. But neither Original Sin nor the devil himself, says St Irenaeus, can obliterate the image of God in us. There is still something unsatisfactory, something missing, and I am not yet persuaded. What else do we need? How when, because of my sin, *I do not hope to turn*, how do I make the turn by which alone I am saved?

As we have seen, and forgive me for labouring the point to destruction, I cannot do this by the exercise of any moral force: for I have no such moral force. It must be achieved by something which in itself lies outside the scope of morality. And that thing is imagination. There is a famous account of an old man who, seeing a crying child being hoisted on the train to Auschwitz, snatched her down and offered himself instead. It was his imagination made him do it. His imagination painted before him the suffering of that little girl, and his imagination, seized by the grace of God, would not let him countenance it.

In much smaller, less dramatic, cases that is how it is with us. When we see our neighbour, it is by our imagination that we are able to become aware that he has feelings too. We are able imaginatively to enter his consciousness. It is this that Christ seizes upon and turns into love of our neighbour. Love of our neighbour begins with the relief from solipsism, the imaginative realisation that other people are really real.

*We appreciate this better in the agony of others, nearly experienced, involving ourselves, than in our own*

And once this mere movement of imagination has been made, giving Christ the Tiger the opportunity to pounce, we may, by his grace, find ourselves led into *further union, a deeper communion* and we are beginning to be turned from the mess of sin to the life of God, *by the love which moves the sun and the other stars.*

T.S. Eliot takes up Mother Julian's saying in *Little Gidding: Sin is behovely, and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well, by the purification of our motive in the ground of our beseeching.* Yes, and the ground of our beseeching is not the arduous, Puritan, moral will striving for some unattainable perfection. The ground of our beseeching is Jesus Christ himself, who by his death besought God for us. And God answered tenderly out of *the fire and rose*