

### 3. Week Beginning 21st September 2014

#### Original Sin and Original Blessing

*(This week begins an extended reflection in three parts. Please follow the links for parts 2 and 3. For a full exploration please read 'Sin is Blind to Beauty' pp172-179 Treasured and Transformed)*

As with personal sin, original sin has worked its way into the heart of our faith, our theology and our daily Christian lives. Millions of Catholics still take the Adam and Eve story quite literally, and understand their actions in the garden to be the only reason for the incarnation. One way or another, the Christian teachings around original, personal and 'establishment/structural' sin will always play a central part in any theology that seeks to probe ever more deeply into the mystery of the relationship between God and humanity. It is clear that most practising Catholics cannot conceive of any reason for the Word-become-flesh other than that of the fate-filled happenings involving two perfect people, a talking snake and an apple. This is so because most of us have been brought up with such a notion. That is why almost all our self-awareness, as Church, has to do with redemption and salvation. The drift and thrust of most of our cautions from the Vatican, of our weekly homilies and of our sacramental catechesis, for instance, is almost totally centred on strategies for encountering, coping with or escaping from, a strange and threatening world. Many a new day will dawn before the hoped-for paradigm shift outlined here will once again become the traditional norm for Catholic doctrine, liturgy and life.

From the earliest Christian times the issue of original sin, personal sin and the sin of the world has been hotly debated whenever a theology of creation, of nature and grace, is proclaimed. Since St Augustine's initial definition of our traditional understanding of original sin, its physical transmission, the necessity of infant baptism, and the centrality of 'the Fall', many more wise and holy women and men have tried to offer a more loving, hopeful and positive picture of creation, incarnation and the light and darkness of humanity. Julian of Norwich wrote that 'first there was the fall. Then there was salvation. and they were both the mercy of God'. In *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), Pope John Paul II's first 'encyclical Letter to the Church', he does not dwell on this doctrine. He includes it, of course, but does not make it the sole cause of the incarnation. Karl Rahner, too, maintains that the fall of humanity was not the first and only reason for revelation and salvation. He reminds us of the Scotist school of thought which holds that the most basic motive for revelation was not 'the blotting out of sin', but that the incarnation was already the goal of the divine plan even apart from any divine foreknowledge of freely incurred guilt and sin. . .

But the required shift in our consciousness and awareness will never come easy. Even though our hearts, being fashioned in the divine image, are already coded for such good news, what is carved into the psyche for centuries will not be reshaped in a day. And even when the rethinking begins, there will be many doubts. We need to study, to reflect on and work together on these profound theological issues concerning free-will, evil and salvation.

A renewed and more enlightened understanding of the meaning of incarnation is of vital importance to our questions about the role of the church in the world. Once it is clarified that we are not merely a 'fallen race in a fallen world', that Jesus Christ came not just to atone for our sins of complicity in the garden, that the sacraments are infinitely more than a protection from our own relentless tendencies towards evil, then everything changes. The church can be seen to exist so that our inherent sacredness can be recognised and affirmed; so that the image of God can be brought to perfection within us; so that the divinisation of our humanity can be achieved. The Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation supports this theological stance when it sees Christ as both the salvation and completion of God's first loving desire.

## Part 2 Original Sin and Original Blessing – A Shift in Focus

There is general agreement among our leading scripture scholars that the story of Adam's sin is a message about humanity as we know it, not about the beginning of humanity. It concerns the way that people stand before God all the time, not a historical description of how the first man and woman fell before God. It is only now that the damaging confusion of myth and history regarding the Adamic narratives is being addressed.

Theologians seem to be in agreement that the central emphasis on original sin has grown out of all proportion in the Christian scheme of things, negatively affecting and distorting the church's understanding of its role and mission in the world. Juan Segundo draws our attention to the two kinds of theology that attempt to explain some of the key 'moments' in salvation-history. There is a false and deadly step taken by a theology that attempts to link too closely the fact of creation with Eden, the fact of a 'fall' with a couple called Adam and Eve, and the beginning of salvation with what happened two thousand years ago.

On the other hand, a renewed, incarnational theology looks for the meaning of original sin in terms of the fact that people sin and become corrupt; the sin of Adam is in our own selves. It lies in the desperate struggle of the species and the person for survival, but also in the deliberate and egotistical choice for supremacy, for control, for possessions, for prestige, for revenge, for punishment. It is a 'going astray', a recklessness, a madness, a sickness, as scripture puts it. Something goes wrong in us, an imbalance sets in, a good drive grows 'out of true'. . .

Resistance, tension, friction and concupiscence in themselves are neutral, necessary and given. But out of alignment, the great human spirit runs amok in confusion, destruction and, eventually, terrible evil. 'These forces of resistance and concupiscence,' writes Segundo in his *Evolution and Guilt*, 'in their specific meanings and contexts intended here, are not erased by baptism but rather given the communitarian possibility for opting for synthesis'.<sup>58</sup> While redemption ended the 'enslavement to sin', it gives us a greater responsibility for our decisions. Baptism, then, is seen as the sacrament of community, and of personal growth within it. It is not all about 'saving my own soul'. We save our souls by saving others.

## Part 3 Original Sin and Original Blessing – The Need for Completion and Fulfilment

Cardinal Hume took this line of approach in one of his reflections:

'in the past Catholics have been accused, perhaps with some justice, of stressing personal sinfulness and guilt and of over-emphasising the need for individual salvation. Today, we need to proclaim not only these, but also the fact that an individual is made for communion and community. We are also called to save the world and witness to the kingdom. There is no 'secular' realm from which God is absent. His presence in the world may be hidden and even denied, but God is everywhere. Therefore we must seek God in all the experiences of life and in all that is ... The truth is that the Church has not a purely spiritual character but is intimately involved in the building of the kingdom in the human city. The new heaven and the new earth are not only to be longed for in the next life, but are to be established here and now.'

What is significant about these words of the Cardinal is the fact that he is interpreting the phenomenon of original sin, not in narrow historical and individualistic terms, but in the wider terms of a world in dire need of wholeness and healing, of the need for completion and fulfilment. He sees the mystery of incarnation as not just about the later putting right of something that went horribly wrong at the beginning, not just the desperate saving of an almost lost

cause through the sin of our mythical ancestors, but also about the vindication of the first creation, the affirmation of God's presence in everything that is, the delight of God in what God has made, whether or not there was some kind of historical 'fall'.

In this instance, the role of the church is about the emphasis on original joy and blessing as well as, or rather than, on original sin and guilt; on affirming the glory of creation rather than on continually cautioning about its ambiguity and falsity; on pointing out the love and meaning to be discovered in daily life rather than on creating a dualistic dichotomy between the natural and the supernatural. The Church exists, in part, to clarify the fact that if there is any line to be drawn, it is not the boundary-line between Church and world, between 'good' people and 'bad' people, between death and life, between angels and devils. What is clarified is that if such a line is drawn (if we agree to use such unsubtle terminology), it is drawn between authentic and inauthentic living, between sheer greed and a magnanimous attitude, between the truly human and the falsely human, between trusting and suspicion, between hoping and being cynical, between forgiveness and revenge.

([Treasured and Transformed pp172,173,174,175](#) )