

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

If One Of You Be Without Sin

Love never rejoices over iniquity, says a famous passage of Paul, but delights in the truth. There's a whole meditation there as we enter into Passiontide, about our attitude to sin as we come across it (in other people). The recognition of our own sin is no easy business, to be accomplished by those fit-all checklists that used to come in prayer books (*Have I told lies? Have I stolen? Have I been unchaste?*) Our propensity to evil lies much deeper than such questions might imply. Saints like Benedict are well aware that irreproachable outward conduct can proceed from festering inner malice. How much apparent virtue is inspired by self-interest, fear of reprisal, or even a sort of vanity? Complex questions, these, which would take a lot of self-analysis to answer — perhaps we'd even need help from someone else. But what about the attitude we display towards the sin of others? What should we feel about it — and what *do* we feel in fact?

The Compassion of Christ

When the kindness and love of God for us were revealed, it was not because of any good action we might have done; it was for no reason except his own compassion that he saved us. So the letter to Titus, read on Christmas at Dawn. The love of God demands that we look out on a sinful world with *kindness*. Not judgment, not hatred, not a secret gladness that the world is worse than we are, but with a kindness that seeks to make good, from what is ours, what the world loses or destroys by sin. The sin of the world calls for *Christ's self-sacrifice*; and that is the model for our attitude towards sinfulness. In going to the Cross, Jesus rides the bloodstream of the human body, until he arrives at the seat of our corruption, the heart of our disease. His determination is that of the physician: to locate, and draw the poison, at all costs, even the cost of his own life. Now, the will to locate the seat of evil, and to publicize and denounce it, is strong in our society. There are whole agencies - the press and political parties are leading ones - devoted to this "holy" task. Flourishing pressure-groups set themselves up as public watch-dogs, polishing their haloes as the public sinners they denounce go down in flames. Sometimes it's hard for us to tell what precise wrong has been done, since the aim is not really the undoing of sin, but the destruction of the alleged sinner. Hard to find here is the compassion of God, *whose desire is not the death of a sinner,*

but that he should turn from his sin and live. Harder yet to find the love of Christ, who came from the heights of blessedness to bear the punishment of sins in which he had no part.

We Are Coming Into Passiontide

How can we celebrate the mysteries of Holy Week, if our attitude to evil is like that prurient, selfish, persecuting world — the one which crucified Jesus? How can we hear the message of liberation, if it is carried by one who became a total victim of sin, who went to his death in a way we would refuse, even despise? Look at Jesus, in the Gospel today, as he listens to the self-righteous voices publishing the shame and condemnation of a fellow-human. What are the workings of the divine heart, when human hearts are closed, and human minds are made up? The kangaroo-court assume there is nowhere for Jesus to go; the Law of God seems plain, standing in the handwriting of Moses for all to read. But Jesus is not phased. Mysteriously, he begins to write some message of his own, *in the dust of the earth* from which all around him are made, the dust we bore on our heads five weeks ago. A humble message, then, and now. *Let the one among you who has no sin cast the first stone at her.* Then he continues *writing in the dust.* It is as if he assails the punishment of Moses with a merciful defence written, not on tablets of stone, but *written in dust.* Let it be written on our human hearts too.

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