

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Can You Inherit Sin?

There is an important tradition about this question, and we need to receive it and see what it tells us.

### A Jewish Belief

Jews had an ancient belief that sin didn't stop in one generation, but could be passed down from father to son. This was a consequence of early Israel's clear perception that the *damage* caused by sin is inherited, does not stop with the one who commits the sin. Hebrews had a profound sense of community and of the mysterious way in which our lives are bound up with each other. There is great wisdom in this. If you grow up in "a house where all's accustomed, ceremonious", it is likely that the word "home" will always mean a place where there is tradition, honour, and respect. If you are brought up in a disordered atmosphere, you will not be sensitive to mess or pandemonium; and the same goes for more important things. If a family gets used to betrayal, lies, theft, and abuse, then these things are likely to be passed to the next generation. Truly I think parents do transmit their values in the end - as opposed to the values they would *wish* to transmit. A boy who has watched his father beating his mother has been deeply changed by the experience; something has entered his behavioural vocabulary, has stopped being unthinkable. In the same way, our holocaust of 200,000 British babies killed in the womb every year has made something thinkable, which once would have made everyone's blood run cold. Who will estimate the heritage that fact will leave for the future?

### Community

When Abraham tells God there might be five decent people left in Sodom, he isn't asking God to get them out before he destroys the place. He's asking him not to destroy it, because there are still good members of that community. The good save the evil by their worth. So in his own family: when God makes a covenant with Abraham, it is made with Abraham and all his offspring too. The deed of the father binds the sons and daughters. We heard recently that in this country one thirteen-year-old boy in every four is involved in criminal activity. Can we doubt that the community itself is sick, where that is true? And will the merits of the 75% of decent lads earn immunity for the 25% who

are outlaws? Will their goodness and hold on values be sound and strong enough to communicate itself to the others? Or will they become embittered, and learn the same abandon for themselves, because they know they are living amongst thieves?

### The Lost Garden Of Eden

Did our first parents cause sin to become thinkable, as Genesis describes, and so shipwreck their descendants forever? As a fact of history, perhaps not. The mythic story is not to be thrown away, however. If Adam is Everyman and Eve his wife, then we're all living in a disinherited family. That seems to me a true way of describing the human condition. We're born wailing, and we plunge through our life looking for one consolation after another, and never find our true home. The happiest of us isn't proof against a yearning sense that something is lacking; and we end in tears once more, ashes to ashes. The best life our parents can offer us is like this. In some sense an inherited frustration seems to match the facts. We don't need to speculate about a primeval crime to understand the doctrine that we have a deeply wounded nature, a desire that we cannot fulfil, and a tendency to choose badly in our anxiety to fulfil it. This is the strange reality to which the Church has given the term *original sin*, because it works like a fault that we've inherited, which is buried in our being.

### Making Grace Thinkable

If the collected evil we have watched makes sin thinkable - even temptingly thinkable - for all of us, Lent is a time for making salvation thinkable, for clearing the ground for hope. It is a journey into the wilderness of our true state, not to face despair, but to find hope. God meets his people in the desert, and turns it into a place of streams; in today's Gospel Jesus finds himself tempted, and is victorious. To fast from the consolations we value will teach us that we are not ruled by them. To share with the real poor will remind us that we are on one earth, in one family with them. To use some silence and to be alone will open our enslaved lives and choked-up hearts to the graceful presence of God, who is so seldom granted access to our busy schedule. Make it thinkable...make it true. A good first week of Lent! *Fr Philip*