

How good do we have to be?

Buried in the question is a slavish attitude which depersonalises God. If God were a municipal authority with cloddishly immobile standards conned out of a manual from the Edwardian era it might be sarcastically appropriate. If the will of God is the sanctification of the world, and in particular the sanctification of every person, the question is miscast and somewhat offensive.

Rabbi Kushner, who poses the question, obviously intends to move his readers from the question as posed into something deeper, and so he should. I would start with the frightening line from the Sermon on the Mount,

You must therefore be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect

It opens up our eyes to a limitless horizon – perfection – and the seeds of a promise – *your Father*. These two poles create a field of divine activity in which we are set, wherever we may consider ourselves intrinsically to belong.

Intrinsically we should never lose touch with the fact that we are made by God (though we often do forget it). Catholics have always believed that this makes us intrinsically loveable in his eyes, a fact which cannot cease to be true. The father scanning the horizon for the returning prodigal son is a true picture of God.

This leads us further, however: to the belief that there is a *perfectability* about us which (if you like) exists in the mind of God (who does not create shonky) and which is therefore a genuine potentiality. This too is indefectible, and includes and undercuts all evidence to the contrary: indeed, the evidence to the contrary (in our eyes) may actually be part of the perfectability (in the eyes of God). Jesus returned to him as a failed evangelist and a condemned and executed criminal deserted by his friends (in our eyes). What he is in the eyes of God we need to read in the most sacred parts of Scripture (John 1:1-18, etc)

There is a strong tide in the affairs of the Church which is replacing the hope of perfection by the pathological need for tea and sympathy. We would, it seems, rather sit around sobbing into our mutual teapots than celebrate our marriage-feast with the grace of God. *God is a forgiving God, he understands that we are dust, so sit down in your dustpan and get your feet up, and put the thought of all that guilt and inadequacy out of your mind.* Well – pastoral care doesn't mean the issuing of such mogadon evangelism. Short-cuts are only useful if they get us where we want to be. The abandonment to mediocrity may be more calming than the drama of salvation: but in the process you happen to lose God, which must be something of a drawback.

If the presence of God is endlessly comfortable, worry. The Bible is not talking about that God. If God is endlessly devastating, ditto, the Bible ditto. The living God has demands that grow continually more awesome, and power that becomes coterminously more present. How good do we have to be? As good as God. Until which happy result, keep taking *The Tablet*.