

A Thought about Sin

The way we've thought about sins has changed a great deal over the centuries. St Paul would think of a cosmic reality - of unredeemed creation showing its true colours in countless unredeemed actions and omissions. Sharing in such evil would have been "earthly" or "fleshly", even "natural" to the unredeemed human being.

Living in the redeemed world, the baptised would rightly consider such things as no longer appropriate, because their *nature* has been remodelled on the divinised humanity of Jesus Christ, raised from the dead.

"Natural" for a Christian therefore means something new.

Medieval Anselm considered sin to be a humanly irreparable crime against the divine honour, only to be redeemed by an equivalent (*ie* divine) restitution.

This was, he thinks, achieved by the divine self-gift of Jesus of Nazareth, acting as representative of the whole human family of which he had freely chosen to make himself a member. But having himself divine honours, his self-gift is "sufficient" to repair our damage.

The concentration of both these bodies of thought is on what sin does towards God. Behind both of them is a slight suggestion that anything we do can affect God, and that we might even affect God adversely, as aggressors or offenders. This is overwhelmingly contradicted in the tradition as a whole: *he who sits in the heavens laughs*. But human beings have habitually taken this thought and run it to extremes. There's a special list of things called *sins crying to heaven for vengeance*, for example (can't remember what they all are).

The idea of an offended, sulking, grudging, vengeful God hardly survives the naming of him, but it's amazing the power he has in people's thinking. Watching a genuine earthly father's patience and sympathy with his fractious child ought to be enough to banish him from reality - is God really ever less than a good man? - but he still generates real guilt in the world.

If you think of the life of God more reflectively, and chase away the ever-recurring illusion that God is part of the Cosmos, then the floor is a bit clearer for action. All our images of God are faulty, fatally flawed (G M Hopkins, eat your heart out) as the first Commandment warns us; God "the Judge" particularly so. One always thinks of the bewigged old buzzard in an English law court, or the stony-faced Russian woman at the ice-rink ("4.5 from the Russian judge"): heartless, prejudiced, bound by the book, class-obsessed....above all, *human*.

One of the things I have grave doubts about is the idea of punishment. If it is conceived of as any kind of retribution, then it seems far beneath God. On the other hand, I also know that sins carry their own "punishment", which extends far beyond the calculations of the sinner, and that there is a question in justice about the *damage* sin inflicts on others, even on *all* others, which is incalculable in any individual case. God lets no sparrow fall to the ground unnoticed, our tears are known to him. *Will he who is just not see justice done?*

I can see that our own sins are visited upon us by their consequences, and if some of the consequences are unknown to us, and we may carry our ignorance to the grave, then surely we shall have them made known to us at last: Jews believed some sin could be put behind us by repentance-and-restitution; some sin needed to be healed by the observance of the Day of Atonement; and some sin could only be expiated by us at the moment of death. *To you all flesh will come, with its burden of sin. Too heavy for us, our offences; yet you wash them away*. The Last Judgment is a scene of revelation, with our self-regarding lives suddenly laid open nakedly in the presence of God's holiness. That future meeting carries an awesome power into this present, where we make our momentary, trifling judgments about what we should write on each page of our lives. But I don't call that *punishment*. It's the power of the truth. I'm scared of the truth, as well as wanting it and loving it.

Part of the truth is that God is merciful to us. *Mercy* is a bent concept in English, because it has been used to translate Hebrew *hesed* (loving-kindness, covenanted love) and Greek *eleos*. *Eleos* is what the Greeks called a *pathos*, an emotion aroused by undeserved affliction in others, usually mixed with fear. It belongs in nobility of spirit, and should play a part in the work of justice. But it isn't the *opposite* of justice, as it appears to have become in English. *Hesed* in Jewish usage is an attitude arising from mutual relationship - between relatives, hosts and guests, masters and servants, those bound together by covenant. It is composed of deeds rather than attitudes: it springs from mutual trust and loyalty. As in the relationship between ruler and subject, there is an element of obligation. For a superior, *hesed* includes the idea of grace, and for God, this is superlatively generous, directly sourced from infinite divine love: God is *hesed*...it can therefore be "expected" of God, even when it isn't deserved. From our point of view, therefore, it takes on an element of *pardon* delivered in order to facilitate God's gift of salvation. *Hesed* is God kicking sins into touch so that he can get at us with his impatient, zealous, omnipotent love.

We always pollute "mercy" with a legalistic cachet, misunderstanding "forgiveness" by the same rule; we think of forgiveness as a faintly dishonourable and uncharacteristic derogation, a bit like something that fell off the back of a lorry. In this we resemble the Stoics, who would have nothing to do with the Greek concept of *eleos*, because they could not accept that moral relations should be governed by a *pathos*, which implies an unworthy weakness. Whereas for Hebrews the mercy of God is identical with his love, which is his nature. If we think of *eleos* as a kind of healing, we may come nearer to the truth.

So to ask *Kyrie, eleison* is to ask God to be himself (merciful, loving) not to ask him *not* to be himself (judgmental and threatening to us). Our British prayer for mercy leaves us condemned and flat on our faces. Our prayer for *eleos* should leave us expectantly looking for God to be himself, despite our unfaithfulness.

The Gospel, of course, asks only that we show others the same *eleos* as we have received from God ourselves: once again, we are to differ from the world around us. I take this to mean that we're really the Church when we communicate *and receive* mercy with genuine trust (like people keeping a covenant). This doesn't mean totting up our brownie points and coming out in the black. In fact, *though your sins be like scarlet, they shall be white as snow: red as crimson, they shall be like wool*. The "righteousness" of the New Testament is nothing earned, possessed or achieved. It is communicated, bestowed as a grace, a gift, a deed of God. This changes sins, which are of their nature lonely and isolating realities, into places of encounter, recognition, rebirth. They are transfigured into holy places, places of gifts *poured out, shaken together, running over*.

English Catholics are starving for want of the Old Testament, of which they remain characteristically terrified or at least apprehensive. If I could recommend a bit of that Old Testament which is so full of hate (allegedly) it would be Jeremiah 30 and 31. There is, furthermore, in Isaiah 49, a picture of a childless Jerusalem suddenly thronged with children, saying in bewilderment, *Who has born all these for me?* which I've always found very consoling. The Jerusalem Bible translates them rather well.