

EPIPHANY 2 2020 St George's Windsor

Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The words, according to our second lesson this morning, are spoken by John the Baptist as he sees Jesus coming towards him. **Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.**

Let me begin by saying something about sin. Most of us will be more than well-acquainted with what have come to be called the 'seven deadly sins'. They are all too familiar to us. Pride, anger, envy, lust, gluttony, sloth and avarice could, each of them, provide a chapter heading in the biography of any one of us. But these of course are particular sins. (And of course there are very many more of them.) John the Baptist however does not look to Jesus as the one who takes away the 'sins' of the world but rather as the one who takes away the 'sin' of the world. Does there throb through our lives a kind of underlying impulse that is the cause of a variety of actual sins?

The seventeenth century priest-poet George Herbert, in line with traditional Christian teaching, certainly seemed to think so. He composed two poems with the title 'Sin'. I shall look at the first.

In this poem, Herbert lists all the ways in which, from our earliest days, we have been guided and instructed; guarded and protected from falling into sin.

Lord, with what care hast thou begirt us round!
Parents first season us: then schoolmasters
Deliver us to laws; they send us bound
To rules of reason, holy messengers,
Pulpits and Sundays, sorrow dogging sin,
Afflictions sorted, anguish of all sizes,
Fine nets and stratagems to catch us in,
Bibles laid open, millions of surprises,
Blessings beforehand, ties of gratefulness,
The sound of glory ringing in our ears:
Angels and grace, eternal hopes and fears.

It seems that everything conspires to help us to be good! But the poem ends with a further two, disturbing, lines.

Yet all these fences and their whole array
One cunning bosom-sin blows quite away.

For all the guidance, instruction, exhortation, coaxing and cossetting that have come our way, and, you might add, for all our good intentions, there is something perverse in the human heart that causes us to deviate (in a thousand different ways) from the good.

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One cunning bosom-sin blows quite away.

The sometime Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, had a go at identifying the nature of the perversity of the human heart. In his commentary on the passage that we read as our second lesson today, he wrote of the 'sin' (rather than the 'sins') of the world:

"...there is only one sin, and it is characteristic of the whole world. It is the self-will which prefers "my way" to God's –which puts "me" in the centre where only God is in place. It pervades the universe.....It is (he says – quoting from the ninth of the Thirty Nine Articles of Religion) an "infection of nature", and we cannot cure it."

Such an 'infection', which no thinking man or woman can possibly fail to recognise, is at the root of an enormous amount of human 'dis-ease'. Is it not our uncontrollable self-centredness that has led to the present environmental crisis, and to our being at odds with the whole created order? Is it not our never-ending self-assertiveness that goes on causing tensions in all relationships from international affairs to what should be neighbourly encounters; leads to our being at odds with our fellow human beings? It goes without saying that any fundamental promotion and championing of 'self' – all our human 'strutting around' - must (rather pathetically and ridiculously when you come to think about it) jeopardise our being at anything other than at odds with God. But, maybe less immediately obvious, is the possibility that somehow the self-centredness and self-interest that seem so eminently commendable and sensible to the down-to-earth and pragmatic amongst us, are the causes of our being profoundly at odds with ourselves; our true selves that is; at odds with what, at a profound level, we know to be right. Maybe, they are the causes of our being ashamed of ourselves, though it might be too painful to acknowledge the shame.

So what are we to do? George Herbert is quite clear that all our being religiously and spiritually and morally enlightened does not provide the solution.

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One cunning bosom-sin blows quite away.

And the great William Temple says we are afflicted by an 'infection of nature', "and we cannot cure it."

But of course neither Herbert nor Temple despaired. Though they recognised that, in the words of one of the Prayer Book Collects, "we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves", as Christians they knew that healing, restorative and redemptive power comes through Jesus Christ. The ubiquitous, all-invasive infection, with which each and every one of us is afflicted, will not have the final word; will not prove terminal.

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So much has been written about those words that it seems almost impertinent of me to provide the merest gloss with which to complete a Sunday morning sermon. But sometimes there is no way out of a tricky situation!

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Through the loving, sacrificial life of Jesus Christ ("like a lamb led to the slaughter" as God's true and obedient servant), and through his resurrection and ascension, we see that enduring power does not lie in the hands of the self-concerned, self-centred, self-interested and selfish, but with those whose vision is fixed on a kinder, more generous horizon; an horizon towards which we are being called by God.

And that God, so Christians believe, has been made known to us, through the sacrificial life and death of Jesus Christ, as the God who is all self-giving, and all for-giving love. It is, in the end, only as we grasp that, that our hearts are filled with gratitude and a natural desire to worship. And it is that – that reaching out in thankfulness and adoration that heals the heart of its perversity.

It was the same William Temple whom I have mentioned in the course of this sermon who once wrote of adoration that it is:

"The chief remedy for self-centredness which is our original sin and the source of all actual sin."

What Jesus Christ discloses to us of the nature of God, and that which calls upon our gratitude and worship, has the power, if we surrender to it, to:

...take away the sin of the world.

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