# *Original Sin: A Lenten Series*

*(based on the Propers for the First Four Sundays in Lent)*
*(Rev'd) David Curry*

## *Lent 2011*

*Parish of Christ Church*
*Windsor, NS*

*Original Sin I*

## *"Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God"*

The story of the Temptations of Christ is read on the First Sunday in Lent. In response to the second temptation, Christ responds with these words: *"thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God."* But, of course, in relation to the idea and the reality of the doctrine of original sin, that is exactly and constantly what we do. We tempt God. We constantly put God to the test, trying to make him accountable and measurable to us. Our task this Lent is to ponder the mystery of our sinfulness, the mystery of original sin.

Original Sin: What is it and why does it matter?

Have you ever wondered, what's wrong with the world? Have you ever wondered, what's wrong with me? In other words, have you ever had that sense that nothing is the way it should be either with ourselves or others or our world and day? Has that sense of things not being right ever resulted in asking about evil? *Unde hoc malum?* Where does evil come from? Or do we persist in saying and thinking that everything is good; just a few bad apples in the pile that spoil everything?

Original sin is the doctrine that there is something radically and inescapably not right about any of us right from the get-go of our being. Very tough stuff. And yet, it seems, this is actually part and parcel of the good news. Original Sin catapults us into the totality of God's grace and grants utter primacy to God's will. Our task is to try to understand something about this strange and curious teaching that seems to cause so much consternation. Yet, as G.K. Chesterton observes, it is the most empirical of all Christian teachings, the most provable from experience.

A doctrine. A teaching. Is it in the Creed? Not directly. But it is there implicitly in terms of the possibilities of the forgiveness of sins. *"I believe in the forgiveness of sins."* Sin is part and parcel of the Christian proclamation of faith. Is it part of an Anglican understanding? Not just the Anglican understanding but as part and parcel of the general orthodoxy of Western Christianity in both its Roman and Protestant forms. So yes. It is explicitly mentioned in the Thirty-nine Articles, in Article IX, where it has the curious distinction of being the only Greek phrase actually given in Greek in the BCP; Φρόνημα σαρκός.

Is it biblical? Yes and no. Meaning that it while rooted in the Old Testament and expressed in the New Testament, it is an idea that belongs to the development of doctrine about sin and grace. Scripture, however, is the illuminating force and principle for the understanding of the doctrine.

Look at some passages of Scripture. Psalm 51 is one of the great penitential psalms, a psalm often attributed to David in repentance for his great sin, his adultery with Bathsheba and his conspiring in the murder of Uriah. In that psalm we read, *"in sin hath my mother conceived me."* What does that mean? Some have thought that original sin is about an infection in our humanity that is literally passed on through sexual intercourse. Is that what David is saying in this psalm? Is he blaming his mother for his actions? Or is he identifying something that isn't right in the root of his own being?

*"The good that I would I do not,"* St. Paul say, *"the evil that I would not do, that do I do."* Wow. There's a problem. Is it just Paul' problem? No. He identifies the human contradiction, I think, the deep seated problem of our wills.

Original sin is not a problem with our bodies but our wills.

To think it will mean negotiating between two principles: on the one hand, the essential goodness of our created being; on the other hand, the intrinsic evil of our wills. In the Collect for Ash Wednesday and Lent, Almighty God is acknowledged as the God *"who hatest nothing that thou hast made"* and yet, at the same time *"dost forgive the sins of all them that are penitent."* Even with the creation and making of *"new and contrite hearts"*, we still are to *"worthily lament[ ] our sins and acknowledge our wretchedness."* It is in that twofold view of things that we can, perhaps, begin to make sense of the doctrine of original sin and see how it catapults us into the grace of God.

But first, let us consider a few places where the doctrine is indicated in the BCP with a greater or lesser degree of explicitness, for instance, the Service of Baptism. The exhortation is wonderfully direct. *"God willeth all men to be saved from the fault and corruption of the nature which they inherit"* and not just *"the actual sins which they [and we] commit"* (BCP, p. 523). Holy Baptism confers a gift *"which by nature [we] cannot have."* It is sola gratia, we might say.

Certain Collects of the Prayer Book, almost chosen at random also convey the primary understanding that we are sinners totally in need of God's redemptive grace. *"We have no power of ourselves to help ourselves"*(Lent 2); *"the frailty of man without thee cannot but fall"* (Trinity 15); *"forasmuch as without thee we are not able to please thee"* (Trinity 19); *"because through the weakness of our mortal nature we can do no good thing without thee"* (Trinity 1); *"O Almighty God, who alone canst order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men"* (Easter 4); *"O God who knowest us to be set in the midst of so many and great dangers, that by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright"* (Epiphany 4); and so on and so on.

And then, on the positive side that arises from this perspective of our general sinfulness, we pray God to *"grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do, and also have grace and power faithfully to fulfill the same"* (Epiphany 1).

Something of the grace of God is understood to be at work in us and through our wills; *"the grace,"* for instance *"to use such abstinence, that, our flesh being subdued to the Spirit, we may ever obey thy godly motions in righteousness and true holiness, to thy honour and glory"* (Lent 1).

This understanding contributes to the feature of the confession of sins as a regular part of our liturgy. The confession of sin belongs to the confession of praise, to the very joy of redemption itself. It allows us to look into ourselves honestly and clearly and not be overcome or destroyed by what we find within ourselves for *"if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart"* (John 3.20). The doctrine of original sin allows us to face not simply our weaknesses but, more profoundly, our wickednesses; not just our actions and non-actions, not just our thoughts and desires, but the very tendency to deny God, and ourselves as his creatures.

As Article IX puts it, *"man is very far gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil"* (BCP, p. 702). G.K. Chesterton notes the wonderful irony of it all. *"There are many who will smile at the saying; but it is profoundly true to say that the glad good news brought by the Gospel was the news of original sin."* To confess our sins means to acknowledge the truth of ourselves in the truth of God and to know that we are not as we should and seek to be. The confession is to God, desiring from him that there be more than this opposition and division of ourselves from him and from one another. Confession seeks God's grace out of the vision of his glory. The confession of sin is the confession of God's praise.

God is greater than our sinfulness and, somehow, through our sinfulness we may come to know that.

*"Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God"*

*Fr. David Curry*
*Tuesday, March 15th, 2011*

## *Original Sin II*

### *"Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David"*

*Kyrie eleison*. Lord have mercy upon us. It is the recurring refrain, not just of the season of Lent, but of our Anglican liturgy. In a way, it is an implicit acknowledgment of the condition of our sinfulness, the on-going legacy of original sin, if you will, the mystery which we are pondering in this series of Lenten addresses.

The Canaanite woman in the Gospel story for the Second Sunday in Lent cries out for mercy. It is, evidently, not a *cri de coeur* that is restricted to the people of Israel. It is universal. She cries out for mercy to Jesus for her daughter who is grievously vexed with a devil, deeply troubled spiritually or mentally, we might say. But that whole idea of being vexed by a devil suggests the power and hold of evil on our souls. Somehow it seems that we cannot just go and do all that we would like to do or even believe that we ought to do for ourselves or for one another.

Paul expresses that deep sense of how we are divided within ourselves. He states the condition of our divided wills, *"the good that I would I do not, the evil that I would not do, that do I do."* We are a divided house and we cannot stand on the power of our strength of will, crowing to the universe, like Frank Sinatra, that *"I did it my way."* Time and time again, the Church in the liturgy through the Collects and the Scripture readings especially, reminds us of this deeply disturbing feature of our human lives, the condition of our divided selves, the reality of our corrupted wills.

And yet, to pray for mercy is to acknowledge this reality without succumbing to the utter hopelessness of despair. To pray for mercy is to be open to God's power and grace which is greater than the contradictions of our being. This is an important point, I think, because logically there is something incomplete in defining ourselves negatively. It presupposes something positive. Sin, original sin, is about privation, a lack or absence of being and truth. But it is totally dependent upon what it denies. Sin is nothing in itself.

The story of the Fall, for all of the shortcomings (and strengths) of its poetic, imaginative and mythological form, makes the same point. Creation and even the divine commandment that God gives to the Adam, to our humanity, is absolutely prior to our actions. In denying the commandment, itself part and parcel of the goodness of the created order, we not only deny God; we also contradict ourselves. *"Did God say?"* the serpent of our devious reason asks. But we know what God said. We choose not to hold ourselves accountable to it.

The story of salvation as it unfolds in the Old Testament concerns itself with the awareness of our evil and sin, *on the one hand*, and the power of God's will for us, *on the*

*other hand*. Not only does God reveal himself to Moses in the wilderness as far more than a mere tribal deity, making himself known in the burning bush as *"I am who I am,"* a phrase that will reverberate down through the centuries of theological reflection, but God reveals his will in the form of the Law to the people of Israel in the wilderness.

The Law is itself a kind of grace, a form of mercy, even though, of course, the Law convicts every one of us. Implicit in the Law, I wish to suggest, is the idea of original sin as it will be ultimately signalled by Paul in the New Testament. The Law upholds the divine principle for the ordering of our moral lives in its twofold aspect: the love of God and the love of neighbour. It gives us a vision of the right ordering of our souls and lives. It gives us a vision of perfection, a vision which we emphatically have not achieved.

It becomes the challenge to live by the teaching of the Law. But how do we do that? Just on the strength of our wills? Do we say that we do the Law? Completely, perfectly? Are there no other gods in our lives? Paul, again, brings out the deeper lesson of the Law which catapults us into the grace of God. He was *"a Pharisee of the Pharisees,"* he says of himself, the strictest of the strictest with respect to the doing of the Law. And there is the unmistakeable sense of pride and, let's be honest, self-righteousness in such a view. But Paul comes to realise that the Law is not just about outward observances; it requires an inward obedience as well. And it is there, in the awareness of the divided self that we discover the full impact of the doctrine of original sin. Paul recognises in particular that the tenth commandment convicts all of us. *"Thou shalt not covet."* To think it is to be aware of how we have committed it.

It is as if he has come to realise the inner spirit of the Ten Commandments and has come to recognise how in our hearts we fail to measure up to the very truth which we know in some sense or other. In that sense, the Law becomes sin. It convicts us of our inner shortcomings.

This sense of the inner division of our wills is part and parcel of the Christian insight. There is not just adultery in the flesh; there is the inner adultery of our hearts, the lust of our minds, and so on and so forth. It is the point which the confession of sin makes so simply and yet so clearly. We have sinned in *"thought, word and deed."* The progression itself is intriguing, instructive and all-encompassing. The deep awareness of the inescapable condition of our sinfulness springs us forward into the mercy of God.

Paul's writings have had an enormous influence on the understanding of the Christian faith, and, perhaps, nowhere more importantly than on the person of Augustine of Hippo. The doctrine of original sin is often attributed to Augustine on the basis of his reading of St. Paul. And, while some have wanted to argue that Augustine has misread Paul, even those from outside the Church, like Sigmund Freud, for instance, basically agree with Augustine's reading of Paul, even though Freud expresses the discontents of

our humanity in an altogether different register and indeed, altogether despairingly. The point is that Augustine gets Paul's point about the divided will of our humanity and he gets the point, too, that we are all implicated in Adam's sin. The point being that we are in Adam. At issue, then, is how we are incorporated into the new Adam, Christ.

Augustine is a magisterial and richly complex figure. He has influenced the shape of western Christianity in both its medieval and reformed expressions. Thomas Cranmer is deeply imbued with what the scholar, Ashley Null, calls *"a mature understanding of Protestant Augustinianism."* Part of that Protestant Augustinianism comes out in the prayers of the liturgy that capture so much of the Pauline and Augustine insight into the human condition and to the priority of divine grace which alone can heal and restore us.

*"All that we can do of ourselves,"* says Augustine, *"is sin."* This is a challenging statement. Children and adults all want to be affirmed that they have done well. *"Well-done, thou good and faithful servant."* And rightly so. How, then, does that relate to this extraordinary claim that all that we can do of ourselves is sin? Because any good that we do is the good that is given to us to do. It is about our participating in God's will. It is God in us. That saves us from the presumption of our self-righteousness.

But aren't we bidden to do good and to work for the good of others? Can God command us to do what we cannot do? No. He commands us to do what he would have us do and in so doing we are at one with his will working in us. *"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,"* Paul tells us. It would seem to suggest that it is simply up to us, though we might wonder about the aspect of fear and trembling, if that is so. But Paul then immediately goes on to say, *"for it is God who works in you."* God works in us. God's goodness and grace is prior and primary. Cranmer understood this completely and undertook on every conceivable occasion to locate our works not as meriting grace and reward but as the expression of a living faith. It was one of the *issues du jour*, a theological issue, belonging to the Reformation over against the late medieval church. *"We have no power of ourselves to help ourselves"* is part of an Augustinian insight that all that we can do ourselves is sin.

We can, I hope, understand that insight derived from Paul, expressed so cogently by Augustine and captured so eloquently by Cranmer. But there are other aspects of Augustine's teaching that relate to the idea of original sin that are much more disturbing. They arise out of his controversy with Pelagius and Julian of Eclanum, both of whom locate a moral principle of goodness in our humanity. This idea, too, has a long legacy that keeps on coming up, especially when assertions are made about people being basically good through their own efforts. Augustine saw that as a denial of the complete sufficiency of God's grace and as compromising, to the point of denial, Christ's saving work on the Cross. The further point is that it completely alters the

understanding of good works. They become our projects and not the forms of divine charity at work through us.

Of course, the Christian revolution was about putting the world upon a whole new foundation, the foundation of divine charity. There would be the constant temptation to turn that foundation into the projects of human rights and works. *"Eyes/ assured of certain certainties,/ the conscience of a blackened street/Impatient to assume the world,"* as T. S. Eliot puts it (*Preludes, IV*).

But, perhaps, the most disturbing aspect of Augustine's view of original sin comes up with respect to baptism. It is something which I still run into occasionally and I am sure you have too. It is the idea that without baptism you are consigned to hell. Augustine is blamed as the author of the hideous doctrine that unbaptised infants go to hell. And, to be honest, he says as much. It scandalises all who hear it. Julian of Eclanum, erudite and urban, was appalled and, it has to be said, provoked Augustine to this extreme view on occasion. It doesn't take away the scandal, or at least the sense of unease about something which seems so harsh. It doesn't fit our sentimental hopes and aspirations whether ancient or modern.

And yet, the point is that we cannot earn God's favour. None of us merits heaven. It is not a right. And all, I repeat, all are sinners. And, while there is a more-or-less to our sins and our sinfulness, each of our sins are particular to us in some way or other, whether known by us or not, in the long end of the day, sin is sin and it is about our being divided from God through our wills. Augustine is consistent; of course, consistency is one of those things we often despise. So much better just to muddle along like Mr. Worldly-wise in John Bunyan's spiritual classic, *Pilgrim's Progress*, confident in himself and utterly unable to imagine that his heart is not good, deluded in his own certainties. *"I will never believe that my heart is thus bad."* What gets lost is that inner knowledge about *"the corruption of our nature and our absolute dependence on God's grace,"* as Alan Jacobs succinctly puts it (*Original Sin, A Cultural History, New York, Harper Collins Pub, 2009, p. 124*).

So what are we to make of this? Augustine in his *Confessions*, which is not simply about his story but his understanding of the story of every one, as it were, shows that sin is present even in the tiniest infant. It has nothing to do with physical or intellectual power. After all, the child can't even speak that is why it is an infant, *in fans*, without speech. And, to be sure, the child may even be innocent in the sense that the child lacks the power to harm, which is the true meaning of innocent, *in nocens*. But Augustine argues that the infant wants what we all want in one way or another and in ways that have marked our personalities in one fashion or another, namely, to be the center of the universe. We aren't. God is. And therein is the lie at the heart of our being.

But consigned to hell? That's a bit rough, isn't it? Yes. And put that way it misses the point of the Church's mission. It is the duty and necessity of the Church to baptise and to teach the importance of baptism. It is not the duty of the Church to say who is or is not going to heaven or hell. That, after all, is a matter to be left to God and to God alone and in a manner that can be left to God in good conscience since God has revealed his love to us most completely and most convincingly in Jesus Christ. Our duty and task is to make that love known. In a way, Christians are nothing more than those who know the love of God. Despite the stain and weariness of our sins, we are the beloved in Christ. And in a Christian understanding this is what our humanity is called to be, *"for God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten son."*

To try to understand that more fully and to live it out more completely in our lives remains the struggle, the struggle for faith and grace over our tendencies to self-will and self-righteousness. But what about baptism? Well, there are those who have died as martyrs for the faith even though they were not baptised formally. Call it a baptism by blood. There are those who die before they are baptised even though that was the intention of the parents and family. Call it baptism by desire and so on. And there are those whose actions reveal the divine charity at work in them regardless of their knowing it.

But, at the end of the day, all that one is talking about is this Christian insight into the nature of our humanity that finds its perfection and truth in God. That is to recognise the incompleteness of our humanity apart from God. To be apart from God is the hell of our own experiences; it is what we will apart from our wills at one with God's will. This becomes part of the mission of the Church. To proclaim Christ Jesus as our saviour and to make him known, not in judgement but in love, a love which triumphs over all our judgements and all our fears and anxieties.

The Canaanite woman has a hold of the truth of God in Jesus Christ. He is the mercy seat and she will not be put off either by the silence for *"he answered her not a word,"* or by the disciples or by the dialogue with Jesus that talks about his mission in terms of the house of Israel. For as she say, *"truth Lord, yet even the little dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table."* She has an insight into the saving grace of God. It underlies her prayer for mercy. If we could do it our way, then, there would be no need for God; indeed, there would be no God. Jesus draws out of her what he would draw out of everyone of us, our desire to be at one with his will for us. To know that is to know the only counter to our divided selves. It is what allows Augustine to say, *"Love God and do what you will."* For to love God is to want only what he wants. Only in him do our wills find their unity.

*"Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David"*

*Fr. David Curry*
*Tuesday, March 22nd, 2011*

## *Original Sin III*

### *"A house divided against itself falleth"*

In the course of these little considerations of the big theme of *"original sin"*, I have tried to locate our reflections in the propers for the Sundays in Lent. The Third Sunday in Lent would seem to offer a particularly dismal view of our humanity that complements perfectly the negativity, as some would see it, of the doctrine of original sin. To the contrary, I would hope to argue, since the doctrine of original sin is really part and parcel of the good news of human redemption. Without the honest appreciation of the sin-wracked nature of our humanity, it is pretty hard to make sense of human experience and the grace of Christ crucified.

In other words, the honest recognition of how compromised we are by the habits of sin is really the entry point to the transformative power of God's grace that leads us as Dante puts it, *"from misery to felicity."* It does so by working on our hearts and minds. We are drawn into the drama of our redemption. The doctrine of original sin belongs to that drama.

We are, in the words of the gospel, radically divided within ourselves. The many divisions and tensions and contradictions within the institutions that drive our social and political lives are really a further extension of the idea and the doctrine of original sin.

The doctrine of original sin is the necessary counter to a variety of social and political viewpoints in our world and day. It is the counter to the ideology of progress, the idea that things are always going forward, that our humanity is constantly on the march towards the more and the better, the better, of course, always measured in terms of the more. It is the counter to the idea that the future is ever brighter and the past always a yawning abyss, the proverbial dark ages. The doctrine of original sin reminds us instead of the perennial darkness of the human heart, the much more persuasive concept of *"the heart of darkness,"* to borrow Joseph Conrad's title.

Utopia versus dystopia. Ideal societies versus deformed and decayed societies, the societies of the chronically dysfunctional. The teaching about original sin attempts to deal thoughtfully and honestly about the human experience without our becoming either romantic idealists and revolutionaries or grumpy curmudgeons and reactionaries who think that everything has gone to hell in a hand-cart, if not yesterday, then the day before yesterday.

Original sin is the counter to such incomplete notions. It speaks directly to the divisions in our souls and in our culture. It is a recurring refrain and a necessary one. If I may trouble you for just a moment about the complexities of Enlightenment culture, indeed,

its contradictions, we may see how an exuberant über confidence in the idea of human perfectibility conflicts with a morbid passivity and pessimism which perhaps, just perhaps, brings out the positive in what otherwise seems to be such a dismal view of humanity. The truth of the matter, I wish to suggest, is that the doctrine of original sin opens us out to the highest potentialities of our humanity. It is only our dogmatic recalcitrance and vain attachment to the projects of our wills that undermines it, on the one hand, and proves it, on the other hand.

Voltaire's novel, *Candide*, written in 1759 is a work of satire. In a manner that is typical of 18th century satire, he deliberately exaggerates the situations of human misery in order to call our attention to the idea of doing something to make things better. As such, the exercise is positive and promising. It reflects the Enlightenment confidence in human reason. The title, *Candide,* is also the name of the main character, Candide. He is ridiculously naive and holds on to the teaching of his tutor, Pangloss. Pangloss is Voltaire's parody of the great German polymath and philosopher, Leibniz. His name means, literally, *all talk*, and by implication, no action. Voltaire is satirizing a phrase from Leibniz's *Theodicy*. The phrase is that *"this is the best of all possible worlds."*

In the wake of the Lisbon Earthquake and Tsunnami in 1755 that literally and metaphorically shook the European world, Voltaire has recognised that, taken at face value, such a phrase is dangerous and hypocritical. Why? Because extreme optimism ignores the realities of human suffering. The educational journey is undertaken by way of the experiential or empirical – here Voltaire shows his preference for the English empiricism over and against French rationalism. Candide is forced to question his ideological commitment to this deliberately misrepresented and overly simplified form of the philosophy of optimism, in part through a *"journey around the world in eighty pages"* in which the experiences of suffering are endless, never-ending, greatly exaggerated and yet educational.

His education takes place, in part, through the companions of his journey. One of those companions represents the exact opposite position to the teaching of Pangloss about optimism. Martin is an extreme pessimist. While the actual philosophy of pessimism would not be articulated until Schopenauer in the 19th century, Voltaire anticipates that viewpoint. Martin, we might say, thinks that this is the worst of all actual worlds.

But Voltaire's insight into optimism and pessimism, I think, is quite profound. Voltaire recognises that extreme optimism and extreme pessimism come to the same conclusion. Both result in doing nothing about the forms of human suffering and misery.

If it is *"the best of all possible worlds,"* then, whatever has happened is taken at face value as good, indeed, the best. Lost your arm? Got cancer? Too bad, so sad? No. It must be good. There is a complete ignoring of the realities of the human experience of suffering. And, as Voltaire shows, human reason is also quite capable of coming up with

ingenious but ridiculous explanations for natural and human events. On the other side, that of pessimism, of course, it is much the same. It is all bad and nothing can be done about it.

So what is Voltaire's final opinion? He hated, and I mean, hated the Church, particularly the Catholic Church and especially the Jesuits, mostly because of their political power. He takes great delight in pointing out the follies and the hypocrisies of the Church. But not just Catholics, not just Christians, and not just religion in general. His satirical wit spares no one, especially those in any kind of authority whether religious, political, social, economic, or academic.

Voltaire was a deist. But, importantly, it seems to me, he held to the idea of original sin, recognising that, left to our own devices, we are pretty destructive and quite nasty. He recognised, too, that the attempts to do good, especially if it is assumed that we are naturally good, can often add to human misery. Against Rousseau's idea of the *"noble savage"*, Voltaire saw the human propensity towards self-interest and understood its inherent destructiveness. A pessimist therefore? No.

Voltaire, like Jonathan Swift, uses satire to point out problems in human society that should not and cannot be ignored. The viewpoint is that in the face of such things one has the moral obligation to try to make things better, even in a limited way. There is the moral project of amendment to this kind of satire. There is a kind of confidence in a cautious and conservative approach to the amelioration of human suffering. But there is as well a strong critique of the over-confidence in human reason, a critique of the idea of progress and human perfectibility – all themes which deny the reality of original sin and its consequences. There is the implicit notion that the *"brave new world"* of human invention can often turn into a catastrophe.

Such themes as progressivism and human perfectibility would become the underlying assumptions in various utopian projects and, indeed, of the forms of social engineering.

Such critiques belong as well to the insight of the judicious Mr. Richard Hooker, one of the great Anglican theologians of the late 16th century in his work, *The Lawes of Ecclesiastical Polity*. *"Laws politic, ordained for external order and regiment amongst men,"* he says, "*are never framed as they should be, unless presuming the will of man to be inwardly obstinate, rebellious and averse from all obedience unto the sacred laws of his nature; in a word, unless presuming man to be in regard of his depraved mind, little better than a wild beast..."* (Book I).

The awareness of the doctrine of original sin is critical for the articulation and framing of the laws which govern and direct human affairs. Ultimately, as Hooker shows, through the witness of Scripture we are given a fuller picture of the human condition. It is about our sinfulness, our inward obstinance to the truth and goodness of God. Such

an awareness contributes to the framing of law. Such an awareness with Swift and Voltaire, writing more than a century and quarter later than Hooker, contributes to the moral task of trying to do something to ameliorate the forms of suffering and injustice.

Swift addressed the issue of child poverty in Ireland in his celebrated *AModest Proposal*, a work of satire which bitingly criticises the English for eating up the Irish. His proposal is anything but modest. He proposes, though not literally, the idea of turning the children of Ireland into a market commodity – babies as a gourmet food source! The economic argument that he develops is a satire about the schemes which belong to the forms of economic reason, a reason which is devoid of a moral conscience. He, like Voltaire, understands the doctrine of original sin.

To Voltaire, we grant the last word, taking the last word of his novel *Candide*. *"We must cultivate our garden,"* meaning, I think, that in the awareness of the many forms of human misery and of the reality of our misery, the reality of original sin, there is the obligation to try to do what one can to make things better wherever one is. It is a kind of practicality but one which, in some sense, is grounded upon the grace of God's goodness which is greater than our sin. It is not a recipe for despair nor is it license for social engineering. As Mark Steyn notes about Roger Scruton's *The Uses of Pessimism*, *"utopianism is not in the business of perfecting the world"* but only of demolishing it: *"The ideal is constructed in order to destroy the actual."* For Voltaire, of course, utopian idealism serves as a way of criticising the powers that be, a form of critical commentary on the follies and the foibles of the politics of his world and day.

In pointing out the hypocrisies of 18th century European culture, and it is suggested, of human culture in general, we see that state of inward contradiction in ourselves. We are a house divided within ourselves. And yet, to know that contributes to the moral programme of our lives. Our spiritual lives, which influence our social and political lives but without being reduced to them, are primarily about repentance and renewal, a repentance and renewal that belongs to the motions of God's grace at work in us. The pageant of Lent unfolds the great drama of human redemption. We are convicted of our sinfulness and convinced of the love of God. In Christ Jesus and not in ourselves do we find that wholeness and integrity of our personalities and lives. Without him, we are but a house divided.

*"A house divided against itself falleth"*

*Fr. Curry*
*Tuesday, March 29th, 2011*

## *Original Sin IV*

### *"Gather up the fragments that remain that nothing be lost"*

It is a rather powerful statement about the nature of human redemption. It appears in the Eucharistic gospel for *the Fourth Sunday in Lent* and may serve as our final word in this little series of reflections about the meaning and nature of original sin.

We are in the wilderness with Jesus. That makes all the difference in the world, all the difference in heaven and earth, we might say. In the earlier gospels of the Sundays in Lent, Jesus has been in the wilderness of our temptations, our sorrows and anxieties, our desolation and despair. It is as if we are more or less like on-lookers or spectators; somewhat passive in relation to what is unfolding before us and yet is something for us. We contemplate the theological aspect of the *justifying righteousness* of Christ for us.

On *the First Sunday in Lent*, he is in the wilderness *alone,* tempted by the devil, having been driven there by the Holy Ghost (and not in some sort of fancy chariot), and only after overcoming the threefold temptations is he attended by angels. On *the Second Sunday in Lent*, Jesus encounters the Canaanite woman, the non-Israelite, who serves to remind us of our sorrows and anxieties about our children and, even more, about the truth of God that is for all people. The encounter recalls at once the vocation of Israel as the holy people through whom *"all the nations of the earth shall be blessed"* as well as suggesting the fulfillment of that vocation in Jesus Christ. Somehow, as this amazing woman senses, even *"the little dogs"* from outside of Israel are fed from *"the crumbs which fall from their masters' tables."* How much more are we fed from what is left-over from the wilderness banquet of God's redeeming love!

*The Third Sunday in Lent* presents us with the dark picture of human desolation and emptiness when we have forgotten our desire for God. To be aware of our need for God is part of the message of original sin. To know that things are not right with us and our world and to know with a fall of our own hearts that *"the heart is deceitful above all else"* is part and parcel of the legacy of original sin. The good news is that such an awareness opens us out to God, to our desire for God and to the divine will which seeks our good. In this gospel, God is with us. It makes all the difference.

Original sin is named in our *Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion*. It is even given its Greek term, Φρόνημα σαρκός, for this *"infection of nature"* is *"the lust of the flesh."* It is further named in the service of Holy Baptism. And, as we have been suggesting, it is constantly implied and explicitly understood in a myriad of ways throughout the liturgy of the Prayer Book. *"We do not presume to come to this thy table trusting in our own righteousness." The Prayer of Humble Access* is a strong reminder that we do not have a principle of moral goodness simply in and of ourselves, as Pelagius and Julian of Eclanum supposed. Original sin awakens us to the need for God's redeeming grace. And his

sustaining and sanctifying grace, too, we might say. Which is what brings us to the wonder of this gospel story of the feeding of the five thousand in the wilderness.

For here we are with Jesus in the wilderness. And we are here intentionally, deliberately, we might say, in the positive purpose of wanting to learn from him. We have followed him into the desert places, the places of solitude, the places that are removed from the benefits and provisions of the human city. We are simply with Jesus.

And here he provides for us with both the spiritual food of our wayfaring and food for our bodies to sustain us in the way of pilgrimage. It is an amazing scene. Our lack is clearly noted. *"They have no wine,"* Mary said to Jesus at the wedding feast of Cana of Galilee. Here in the wilderness, we do not have enough money to buy enough bread that would be sufficient for all or any of us. There is, it seems only five small barley loaves and few small fishes. We lack the means of sustenance. We, literally, can't get any satisfaction, at least not on our own.

The problem is far deeper than we realize. For the lack or insufficiency or dissatisfaction here is about more than the physical and the material. We lack *"the true bread from heaven"* that alone can satisfy our souls. And yet, Jesus is with us and that makes all the difference.

Notice, though, that our need and our lack have to be named. There is not enough money to buy enough bread; there are only five small loaves and few small fishes. This recognises our own lack and incompleteness. It is a significant vestige of original sin. We are pretty far gone into the wildernesses of our lives. It is as if Jesus wants us to be aware of our insufficiencies, our emptinesses and our dissatisfactions. Only then, can we begin to be fed spiritually and physically.

This, it seems to me, is a tremendously important feature of the doctrine of original sin. We are in ourselves *"very far gone from original righteousness,"* as the Article suggests, and yet, to know this and then to be fed by Jesus is absolutely wonderful. We are with him here in a different way than on the other Sundays in Lent. We contemplate, we might say, the theological aspect of the *sanctifying righteousness* of Christ in us.

Twelve baskets of crumbs from the master's picnic are gathered up. In John's gospel this signifies the twelve tribes of Israel, the bread of the children, you might say, but it also signals the twelve apostles, the foundation of the Apostolic Church. With the gathering up of the fragments, we are provided with the spiritual food of our wayfaring. What falls from our gracious master's table is more than enough to feed the Church in all times and all places. But only if we realize that we need to be fed! It means to appreciate the provisions which God makes for us in the wilderness journey of our lives.

Which is what the teaching of original sin is actually all about. The awareness of our need for God in the soul of our being and in the souls of our communities is the counter to the soft sentimentalism that refuses to acknowledge the darkness of the human heart and its propensities and proclivities to sin. We are, simply put, pretty far gone. We are an unrighteous mess, let's be honest! Each of us is *"of his own nature inclined to evil,"* as the Article puts it, and buttresses it with a scriptural foundation, for *"the flesh lusteth always contrary to the spirit."* Such is *"the fault and corruption of the Nature of every man."*

To know that is the good news of original sin for we are reminded of the provisions that God makes *for us* and that he wants to be *in us* through his sanctifying and sustaining grace. And all to his glory, the glory of the only-begotten Son of the Father. Here we are with him and he with us, *"he in us and we in him",* as our Liturgy puts it. Somehow the doctrine of original sin belongs to the nature of our incorporation in Christ. It belongs to the pilgrimage of our souls to God and to our fuller participation in the life of Christ.

*"Gather up the fragments that remain that nothing be lost"*

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