

*Almighty God who forgives all who truly repent...*

We labour most of our life under a thick blanket of illusions. Rarely do we stop and think— and that's often all it takes to open our eyes, but rarely do we stop and think, and so dispel the falsehoods that glitter and twinkle just out of our reach and lure us, never learning the lesson, every time the same onto the same rocks sinking in the same boat.

We start life with innocent enough illusions: that pigs wear dresses and have brothers called George, or that steam locomotives have faces and talk in thick scouse accents; later on we may think treacle is mined or that waving a stick and shouting lame cod latin makes us an alumnus of Hogwarts. Half-baked education sprinkled with folk wisdom may make us believe that men have one rib less than women or that we lose most of our heat through our head— I was certainly taught that chestnut in a high school science class.

As we approach maturity— I'm not sure we ever reach it, but we sometimes come closer to it— as we grow up we have more grown up illusions to pull over our heads when the world looks scary. We fondly imagine that we will meet a soulmate and the world will become a Hollywood extravaganza as we waltz of into the sunset of happy ever after; that if we work hard and put in those extra hours the boss will notice and we will prosper; that Liz Truss was the right person to put in charge of the country- niche illusion but she at least still has it. The last one we lose is the most persistent illusion of all, that we will live for ever and will not die. Hydra-headed, when we lose illusions, more are waiting in the wings to take their place; our lives are as soaked with illusions as Rishi Sunak's suit.

The cynical will say that pretty much all religious belief is one gargantuan illusion, when it's not being opium or the Tory party at prayer or the source of imaginary sky fairy friends or some such. What do they know? Clearly, very little. But even within our faith, if we ring-fence belief in the super and supra-natural as non-illusory, occasionally little bubbles of illusion do persist in Christianity; half remembered misinterpretations that repetition turns into traditions which the years turn into dogma. One is that there is a sin which is so terrible it cannot be forgiven— God would do anything for love but he won't do that— a sin so terrible God will refuse to commute or remit the sentence and *that* sin is 'blasphemy against the Holy Spirit'. Just to make life that little bit uncomfortable for his followers, Jesus never went into any detail about what that sin actually was.

If you stop and think about this, it's a pretty scary thing indeed, which is perhaps why we tend not to stop and think about it. If we did we would start to think that God is forgiving and God is loving, but he has his limits. There is a square on the snakes and ladders board of life that will slide you straight off the table and into the fire should you land on it. And nobody knows which square it is. It's probably something really horrible but who knows, it might just be skipping church on Sunday and going to the beach instead. With the sin unspecified none of us can rest one hundred per cent secure in our salvation.

There being a blank where the definition should be means you're more than likely to hear 'blasphemy against the Holy Spirit' used as a condemnation of whatever the religious speaker is railing against today. Conservatives, for example, regularly accuse LGBT people of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit. I have been consigned to Hell almost as many times as I've had hot pies- I come from Yorkshire that's quite a few. On the other hand, no less a person than Desmond Tutu thought it was actually homophobes who were committing the unforgivable sin. I've heard 'blasphemy against the Holy Spirit' raised often enough that I sort of assumed there must be a gap there in the record for people to project whatever was their bugbear into. And yet and yet. This gap in the sin sheet is illusory. Just an illusion... There is no space to fill. Our gospel reading this morning, and there it is.

*“Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”— for they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.”*

So there it is. The sin beyond all other sins is not something you're likely to have done; it's not something you are likely to do by accident and by the time you've realised, it's too late to make amends; it's not about how well or how badly you conduct your personal life or whether you religiously keep to the rules. It's something very specific: saying Jesus is Satan.

Even though the sin is nestling in a niche in a part of the cliff face we are unlikely ever to reach, I trust you'll agree, it's still sobering to know that there is something out there that is beyond God's forgiveness.

Flip this over, however, and we could find comfort and even, possibly, that least Anglican of expressions of faith, joy. Because if there's one thing that cannot be forgiven, then everything else can be. Jesus says as much:

*Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter.*

And here lurks a shocker. Most masses the priest intones at the words of absolution 'Almighty God who forgives all who truly repent...' Easy enough: change your ways, get forgiveness. But... what if he forgives those who don't truly repent as well? Those who just pretend to amend their ways to get you off their backs? Those who try hard to change and fail? Those who just don't give a damn what you hoity toity religious busybodies think, those who know they're doing wrong and do it anyway, those who really enjoy what they're doing particularly because they know it's wrong, those who *ne regret riens*, who did it their way and couldn't care less? What if Don Giovanni refusing to repent was forgiven anyway? Less dramatic denouement to the opera if he wasn't dragged screaming and kicking into hell, but what if? This is an important what if, because, how many of us, hand on heart, can be absolutely courtroom confident that we truly repent?

Of course repentance, however imperfect, is important. But it is something we do and it's a fundamental of Christianity that nothing we can do can save us. We cannot earn our own salvation, not by behaving ourselves, not by saying sorry when we're wrong, not by turning away from past wrongdoing.

We cannot make God forgive us.

But he does.

In which case, why bother? If God just forgives, then why?

Why not throw caution to the wind, indulge our whims and fancies, live life to the full try it, do it, get the t-shirt and the scars to prove it? Why bother? Well firstly, there will come a point when it will dawn on us that we've done it all, taken everything the world has to give, and we're still strangely empty inside; we've stuffed ourself with indulgence and still we strike a hollow ring, got to the bottom of the bucket list and the bucket is empty. There is a gap inside us all that only God can fill.

More though, we bother, because it's the right thing to do, and that is a joy. It's not a reward postponed or a mark in the doomsday ledger, it's an immediate prize. As the rather cringier version goes 'virtue is its own reward.'

If there is nothing we can do to save ourselves, is there perhaps nothing we can do to damn ourselves? Might it be that if we say there is, that by what we say or think or do we can book ourselves a one way ticket to the fiery furnace, might it be by saying that we are actually doubting God's forgiveness, doubting his mercy, doubting the extent of his love?

One last thing. We cannot be resentful of those who don't try and are still forgiven. Because that God of overflowing forgiveness that forgives the people who don't bother, the people who don't believe, the people who are unconcerned and unrepentant is the same God that forgives us. It is the action of his love, given to those whose lives don't deserve it, *that* love which inspires us. Conditional love is not inspiring. God's forgiveness is not something that is inert, passive. Freely given, it transforms the recipient. Freely forgiven, the reprobate responds. Such is the wealth of love in that forgiveness, it cannot be ignored, it must be reciprocated.

If God has forgiven you, he's forgiven other people too: the ones you think can't be forgiven, shouldn't be forgiven; the ones you cannot forgive. All are truly forgiven.

Perhaps the words of absolution should be God forgives all; now truly repent. It's not as snappy, but rather than causing God to forgive us, repentance is our response to being forgiven.

Personal retribution or extravagant love? What do you think God is?