

*God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us*

The scar is barely visible now, but, some forty-eight years after the event, the fourth finger of my right hand still bears the marks of where a dog sunk its teeth into the unwary child who reached out to stroke it. Now with the benefit of experience I can confidently say that a large dog needs to be approached alertly, cautiously, slowly. And, as that 9 year old running home in tears with a bleeding finger could have told you, we need to be aware of all the beast. It's no good being entranced by its beautiful big brown eyes and wagging tail if we forget that not only do those eyes come with a set of rather less beautiful teeth, but also that eyes, teeth, paws, legs, muscles, sinew, bone and brain- all parts of the dog in fact- work together as one toward the same goal. It is dangerous indeed to only pay attention to one part.

Now in this respect- of it being safest considered as a sum of its parts- I would like to suggest that the Bible is pretty much 100% Rotweiler. And a lot more dangerous. *If*, as is always a temptation, we take one little snippet of scripture and concentrate on that to the exclusion of the wider picture- if we think that the cute eyes are the whole dog- *then* we've put ourselves in real danger of being badly bitten. Many, many of our fellows bear the scars.

It's easily enough done and there are many times the Bible gives us backing for our badgering. The Old Testament has a lot of sinners getting their just deserts and apparently endless laws, rules, regulations, statutes and ordinances to help us recognise the sinners in our midsts which, as the rules are drawn so widely, is pretty much anyone we choose. Saint Paul's letters are usually having a go at somebody because of something they've done and even occasionally provide us with a handy short list of things not to do and people not to do them with. Which is half the attraction of the Bible: after all, there's nothing we Christians really like more than to point out to our friends, family, colleagues and, especially, perfect strangers what terrible sinners they are. You should see my email inbox after a rainbow flag went on our web site. Christian fingers, it seems, are ever ready to wag, our tongues eager to clack and tut.

Even Jesus sometimes seems to be give us carte blanche to poke our nose into our neighbour's business, have a good rummage around and hold up any soiled goods we find to public display. And all for their own good! It doesn't get much better than that eh?

Except of course, it's not really like that. When scriptures are talking about how to deal with sin, they're not really giving us a guide to the best way to go about excluding the less salubrious members of our congregations so that we can create a tiny elite of church-going puritans (CEEC tale note). This is not a lesson in how to make a scapegoat out of materials everybody has at home. If the church is, as St Augustine maintained, a hospital for sinners, it is a strange hospital that throws the patient out if she doesn't immediately get better, or demands a bill of clean health before they can be admitted.

So starting with this premise— that what the scriptures are *not* telling us is how best to get rid of people we don't like, but how to respond to that most human of conditions, sinfulness— I wish today to lay before you three considerations about the Christian response to sin that we can take from the biblical witness.

First, is the need to keep a keen sense of proportion, and, very much related to this, to try to discern where the real sins are taking place.

Jesus, to take a good example, was a notorious sinner. At least he was as far as the religious experts of his day, those who knew their scriptures like the back of their hands, were concerned. And though, with the hindsight of Easter vision we can confidently declare that nothing could be further from the truth, we cannot deny the true piety, the real holiness, the real striving after God of those who condemned Jesus. Godliness may be next to cleanliness, but as we all know, it's not necessarily a protection against getting it wrong: often quite the opposite.

Obsession with minutiae is a common human religious response, and one we are a long way from leaving behind in the dust of 1st century Palestine. Yet what Christ demands of us is that we drop the magnifying glass, stop straining to produce a gnat. A speck is, after all is said and done, a speck.

Equal marriage, for example, is a very hot topic in the Church of England right now, but you won't find a solitary mention of it, one way or the other, in the Bible. The obscenity of the abuse of the poor, on the other hand runs all the way through the good book like the lettering in the middle of a stick of Brighton rock. It may be the more exotic differences of our fellows that grip *our* imaginations, but condemnation of the banal, everyday obscenity of human greed is printed on every biblical page.

When we hear the only description in the Gospels of a soul in after-life torment, the sin which was condemned there, wasn't loving the wrong person: it was being rich. So, one: keep a constant reality check.

Second point. Telling people what terrible sinners they are almost never has the desired effect, and in fact it's probably the best way to guarantee that people will stop listening.

When I lived in north London, I would quite often go to Wood Green Shopping Centre on a Saturday morning. The experience is rather like West Croydon on a Saturday afternoon. Before Christmas. We're talking busy. And every week I'd fight my way through the press of jostling shoppers, and suddenly emerge from the consumer scrum into a clear space. This was the unofficial cordon sanitaire the crowd created around some of our more evangelical brothers, complete with megaphones, who came every weekend to give N22 the benefit of their preaching. Sermon synopsis, 'you're all sinners'. Net sinners saved: Nil.

This isn't a problem only of the 21st century. The Old Testament can sometimes give a depressingly repetitive account of God raising up prophets to tell Israel how sinful it is, who go on to find themselves at best ignored and more often than not murdered in increasingly imaginative ways for their pains. Only Jonah miraculously managed to elicit contrition and repentance from the men, women and cattle of Nineveh. But the crux of that story is not that the people listened, but that Jonah had to go into the belly of the whale before he would.

So, two, no shouting.

Thirdly, we must use the yardstick we would use for ourselves for others. This message is perhaps the clearest of all in scripture, either introduced with a stick

*"Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged"*

or a carrot:

*"In everything do to others as you would have them do to you."*

Sin is not just a personal thing of course: it can be a structural— racism, inequality, slavery— and at that impersonal level we don't need to be perfect ourselves before

we can call it out. But if we're going to get personal, better make sure we're squeaky clean first.

*“First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour's eye “*

(hint: that log will never shift).

The clearest and most vivid insight we have of God's attitude to our failings is found in Luke's gospel, in the parable of the Prodigal Son. Here, the returning prodigal meets his father. Before even he has the opportunity to open his mouth and tell his father why he has returned his father is rushing out with joy to greet him. For all the father in this story knows, repentance could be the last thing the prodigal son intends. Maybe he wants more money. Maybe he wants to tell the father how much fun he's had in the foreign fleshpots. Yet, the father's overflowing, superabundant love rushes out to greet his son.

Sin is our obsession, not God's; love is God's obsession, and so it should be ours.

Back the start of the sermon, that line from St Paul's letter to the Romans:

*Jesus died for us when we were still sinners*

He didn't wait till we were perfect or repentant or had a conversion experience or confessed the true orthodox faith. Nor did he die for us in anticipation of some future repentance or conditional upon us cleaning our act up. He died for us when we were still sinners. And when are we ever not sinners?

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So, Christians need a sense of proportion; we need to stop shadow boxing and start fighting the real demons-the structural sins of the world. At a personal level we can look at our own failings and deal with those; and we can look at others and think how we can build them up with love. We should not be looking to stop other people sinning, but encouraging them to grow in love. Sin does not shrivel away when we shout at it. But it does dwindle away to nothing in the shade of love.

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