

“On not being innocent”
Sermon preached by Professor Paul Gifford,
(Department of French at the University of St Andrews)
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In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In our Psalm for today, we sang: ‘Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered/Blessed is the man to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit’ (*Psalm 32*). Transgression, sin, iniquity - and the deceit that goes with them. All our texts in some way or other, have to do with these darker propensities. Darker both in the sense that they are often opaque to understanding, and also in the sense that they have to do with uncomfortable, distressing, morally ugly things.

What our readings have in common, I suppose, is the human need for innocence. They are about the way we try to deal with not being innocent - and the way God deals with it; about the moral and spiritual *distance of God-unlikeness* and the *new contact* made across that distance.

Do we need to be innocent? What is this need for innocence? Isn't this a refined and fanciful notion, applicable perhaps only to some kind of ethically sensitive elite? No, I don't think so; very much the opposite. Like religion itself, it's something natural and quite primitive in all of us, in fact something almost animal...

I wonder if you know what a ‘hang-dog expression’ looks like? I once had an extremely intelligent and affectionate dog - actually, a bitch, a cross between border collie and springer spaniel. She was brimful of life and fun, but she was more than a little delinquent. If she decided the walk wasn't long enough, she would simply lengthen it. She'd refuse to turn in at the gate - and come back on her own two hours later! But she knew full well that this was transgression: she was on the wrong side of the law governing our relationship.

So when she came back, we got the full hang-dog treatment. Head down, embarrassed twitching of eyebrows, oblique glances that never quite met yours; hesitant forward shuffle, with bowing movements of the head, a progress that could at any point be interrupted by a stern word or growl-like sound - at which point she would sink down into an utterly submissive posture, as flattened as possible, with nose miserably resting on paws. The object of this ritual was to get close enough to lick your hand so as to say sorry, have her fault remitted and ensure that the relationship of acceptance was restored. In a way (anthropomorphically, of course, but *truly in an evolutionary sense*), you could say (anthropomorphically, but truly in evolutionary terms) that the aim was a restoration to innocence; and that's as good an image as I can think of what primitive or natural religion is like.

In primitive religions, the gods are the powers that control your life - top dogs in a cosmic, or later, metaphysical sense. They can dispense weal and woe, and they are very sensitive to offence; so that you had better appease their anger by some form of ritual propitiation. Usually, this involved blood sacrifice; it does in the priestly prescriptions of the Old Testament which you can read about in Leviticus.

If you ever have time to get to the bottom of the religious notion of sacrifice, I do urge you to read on this subject one of the most profoundly original and searching meditations of recent years: that of the French writer René Girard. His first book on this theme was called *Violence and the Sacred* (1972, in the original French version). His second, taking its title from the gospel of Matthew, *Things hidden since the foundation of the world* (1986). In these books, and many others written since, Girard offers a devastating account of the antecedents and origins of our need for innocence and the disastrous ways in which it seeks relief. If you read his books, you'll very clearly see why this whole area of our life is, from the dawn of properly human time, an elaborate construct of deception and self-deception on a grand scale.

In the beginning, says Girard, was the attempt to shift the blame or 'pass the buck' [Fr: 'le bouc émissaire' – the scapegoat], so as to escape the consequences of moral imperfection and evil in ourselves: in fact, of murderous violence. The problem, you see, in any human group is to control and manage the destructive energies of what Girard calls mimetic appropriation and rivalry. Mimetic appropriation means simply that I want for myself what you want, precisely because you want it. It's a form of imitative or copycat or tit-for-tat rivalry; it's what makes me frenzied and willing to kill you; it's also what makes human violence incremental and different from the limited violence characteristic of animal species. All societies have some mythic, carefully coded, dream memory of a founding murder. It's what the Bible, much more deliberately and truthfully, recalls just after the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, in the story of the murder by Cain of his brother Abel.

How do human groups regulate and manage this violence within them, which of course threatens to tear them apart? Typically, says René Girard, by re-directing this perillous electricity of mimetic rage at a scapegoat figure, who acts as lightning conductor. The scapegoat is chosen perhaps for some suggestive but quite arbitrary difference. The essential point is: he is symbolically endowed with a representative status - he's designated as emissary victim, he stands for the community as a whole. The mimetic rivals, who, in the moment of paroxysm, include the entire community, instead of tearing each other apart, turn on the victim figure and kill him.

At that point, something strange and magical happens. The scapegoat, because his murder liberates and pacifies that paroxysm of violence which would otherwise have torn the community apart, is perceived as having a foundational and saving importance; and to him is then attributed the invention of the law which regulates what is and is not permitted: in other words, the very thing that enables human beings to live together despite the murderous passions of the human heart. He, the victim figure, begins then to take on a sacred value. Indeed, he is regularly divinised in mythology and religious

ritual. 'The great sky father, who once dwelt among men, says...'. Myths, taboos, propitiatory rituals – the things that institute 'culture' - manage in this way to be both a *commemoration* and a *cover-up*.

This allows Girard to explain why animals came to be sacrificed. It wasn't simply that they were valuable possessions of the sort that would demonstrate subjection and appease the wrath of the gods. There is a cunning and deceitful sub-text. Animal sacrifice is a ritual re-enactment of the founding scapegoat murder - the *human blood-sacrifice* - which is at the origin of social morality, religion, civilisation - and all culture. It's a sort of allusion, as explicit as it dare be. Its function is to renew, in a receivable, anodine way, the - profoundly inadmissible - founding pact, by which we live together, despite being what we are.

If we cultured and civilised human beings knew better where we have come from, and by what evolutionary processes, we would perhaps be less disconcerted than we are, less disarmed than we are, by the catalogue of horrors we hear about every day in the news. Kenya, Iraq, Ruanda, Tchechnya, Ireland, Cambodia, Vietnam, Stalin's purges, the Holocaust of European Jews...the list stretches back unendingly into history... That savage war in ex-Yugoslavia, for instance, occurring in supposedly civilised Europe, in the century of our greatest technological mastery, exactly illustrates what happens when the founding pact breaks down: shelling of civilians, ethnic cleansing, systematic rape and mass-murder...

Of course, we're terribly shocked by all of this. What? Aren't people naturally good, naturally innocent? And with the tabloid press, we say: WHO IS TO BLAME? In other words: we cast around to find ...yes, a suitable scapegoat.... But you see, we simply do not know ourselves. We are not prepared to find - and we do not want to know - what is buried under the evolutionary floorboards of our own hearts and minds...

St John says: 'If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us' (1 Jn 1: 8). It has always been part of the Christian affirmation - part, I believe of the *spiritual realism* of the Christian faith, as well as of its *modernity* - that there is in all of us a sinfulness - I mean, a propensity to moral evil - which is 'original': that is, transmitted in the genes, ancestral in the cultural psyche, antecedent to our own moral will, something before and behind us, as it were, colouring what we ourselves will and desire. Anthropology and ethnology give us, as I have been busy suggesting to you, an extended commentary on the corpses under the floorboards, the skeletons, the ghosts and the mass graves in the inner cupboard. What the Bible gives us is, for the first time, a sharp, original and uniquely truthful picture of what our own willed and consenting participation in moral evil is like; it tells us what iniquity is, what sin is like.

The account of the fall of man in Genesis is just as we would expect, if our sinning is aboriginal in the above sense. It shows a leading voice, older than we are, already present in the Garden of our Innocence: that of the Serpent, insinuating what we're missing out on and how very unfair to us that is. And, as we would expect, what he suggests to us, in his deceit, is a rivalry of mimetic appropriation. 'Ye shall be as gods, knowing good and

evil'. That plural 'gods' has meaning only in relation to primitive, natural religion; the sort of religion we are all born into by the very fact of being human...

Yes; but notice the profound novelty. The rival we are invited to emulate and outplay is God. And notice the ancient deceit practised: the Serpent speaks of God as imagined in natural religion - the top-dog, who makes the law with its restrictive interdicts and taboos, the super boss-man who jealously prevents us by this means from experiencing the innermost secret of life. Think of what *would* be yours, says the Serpent, *if only* you were free enough and bold enough to *transgress*..

What the Serpent promises, in fact, is the transgressive thrill of being, as we say (we say this 'naturally' i.e. *archaically*) 'godlike': sovereign and arbitrary arbiters of all things, including of all things permitted and forbidden, good and evil. Originally and always, in a hundred variations, the temptation is to imitate the power and realise the privilege of that plural. It is - apart from God, in rivalry to God - to play at being 'gods'. And the most fundamental problem with that, the problem that the Bible uniquely shows, is that *it isn't true*: The promise of godlikeness is a falsehood and an illusion; because the one true God, Creator of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible, *isn't* one of the gods. *Isn't* the oppressive father and superego and mimetic rival we ourselves forever make in our own image and project into the heavens above.

God isn't as we 'naturally' - archaically - imagine. And you can see quite well here that, in the end, as in the beginning, sin comes down to being *like our gods* rather than *like God*. As St Paul says: 'All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (). The sinning isn't different really, from the falling short: these are, at least, directly reciprocal functions. But you can see too from *Genesis* how it is that we have only obscure and twisted glimpses of our sinning until and unless we know who God is, and what his *glory* is like. Until then, we are struggling with the intuitions and knots of individual conscience; we mistake morality, even the crassest tabloid moralism, for true religion; and we are disarmed by evil, because we struggle to confront it only with the hopes and disappointments of some form of ethical idealism.

It took Israel a very long time - and it takes us a long time - to come to a mature awareness of these things. Our readings are all landmarks on that road.

Psalm 32 is a song of innocence in this sense: the psalmist is looking for innocence where it may truly be found, in the forgiveness of a righteous God, who knowing hearts and minds, is yet a God of forgiveness and deliverance, not simply a guardian of the moral law, or a keeper of the moral score. Psalm 32 is also about the need for confession, for conscious speech articulating and confessing the sense of the things we keep under wraps, if not actually under the floorboards. 'When I confessed not my sin, my body wasted away/ through my groaning all day long'. We all feel guilt; that is entirely natural, entirely human, because the best in us always condemns the rest in us. The real question is rather: do we see guilt as a matter of sinfulness? That is: do we relate it to the purposes of the holy, righteous and loving God whom we are denying; and, if we do, do we know what to do about it?

When we don't, a sense of guilt, justified or unjustified, can do us grievous bodily harm. When we do, there is liberation: 'I acknowledged my sin to thee and I did not hide my iniquity'. There for the first time, we encounter 'no deceit': no cover-up, no pretence, no shifting the blame. 'Then thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin'. And so the Psalm ends with a shout of joy at the 'steadfast love that surrounds him who trusts in the Lord'. That we can be restored to that innocence which is the true potential of our created nature is indeed a very joyful thing, good news indeed. 'I can't forgive myself', we say. No, indeed. But the good news is, and the truth of the matter is: we don't have to.

What the prophet, for his part, wants us to hear is the urgent message that condemns our natural, primitive religiosity, with its catastrophic duplicity of evil living, on the one hand, and ritual propitiation, on the other. It is no good, it avails nothing, to suppose that the high and holy God be bought off, with animal sacrifice and much ceremony, when human hands are steeped in human blood, and human hearts set on licentiousness, injustice, oppression. 'Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow'. Nothing could be more characteristic than this of the prophetic tradition of Israel. And nothing is more distinctively different from the secret complicity, always latent in primitive or natural religion, between violence and the sacred. Do we understand what a revolutionary difference, what a mountain-shifting breakthrough in religious insight and understanding, that is?

We still need to hear that ancient message, lest we find ourselves living, as we often do, complacently or complicitously, in a world of pornography and child prostitution and sweat-shops and judicial torture and tyranny over the poor. The most awesome parable of the gospels, we remember, is the parable of the sheep and the goats. This warns us squarely, perhaps with just this Old Testament passage from Isaiah in mind, that at the end of time, when the secret of all hearts is laid bare, we the faithful may be dismissed from the presence of God, whom we do not resemble and who will not - perhaps *cannot*, recognise us - not because of anything we have done, but because of what we have *not done* of the works of justice or of mercy that had claim upon us.

That gives the true measure of the small word 'sin', the measure of God-unlikeness. Yet we are right too to notice that this message of exhortation and warning from Isaiah ends like the Psalm on a note of confidence in the power of God to restore even the deepest human corruption to innocence: 'Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow'. (*Isaiah 1: 18*)

Did Jesus, I wonder, have this in mind when he says to Zacchaeus in our passage from Luke, chapter 19: 'Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; I must stay at your house today'? Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector: his job was to oversee the raising of revenue for the civil authorities and, though them, for the occupying Roman power. That work, among the hard-pressed poor of his own nation, was enough to put him beyond the moral pale, as a profiteer and as a collaborator. Certainly, we are told he had grown rich on it, though he is penitentially anxious to say, and he can say, that he has been just and even generous in his exercising his charge.

What attracts the attention of Jesus to him is however that this dubious character, this man who carries a powerful social stigma, is also someone who believes in the promise announced in Isaiah, the hope of restoration to innocence, and his ardent wish to see this fulfilled in the person of Jesus. It is an eloquent and touching detail of the story that this man of diminutive stature, doubtless not young and possibly well-padded, is eager enough, and expectant enough to cast aside his social dignity and scramble up a convenient tree so as not to miss anything of the action. Whatever his standing in social morality and public esteem, he is looking in the right direction; and, we might say, at the right level of elevation.

Jesus reads all this with the remarkable discernment of men and motives that is everywhere apparent in the gospels. And with that no less remarkable freedom from conventional moral judgment, he requests hospitality, and then, against the murmurs of reprobation and scandal, pronounces a solemn and paradigmatic approval: 'Today salvation has come this house, since he also is a son of Abraham'. The pariah, the very plausible candidate for the role of tribal scapegoat - Zacchaeus is the sort who wind up facing kangaroo courts and lynch mobs once the legions march out - is reintegrated into the nation and into the hope of Israel. 'For the son of man came to seek and save the lost'. Not because of the moral perfection of the lost, we notice; but because, imperfect and reprobate as they are, the lost are nevertheless embraced by the forgiveness of God, if only they will wait upon it and look to it. It isn't his morality that justifies Zacchaeus, though that was less contemptible than people in their scapegoating resentment allowed; it is his true religion. And that is crucial: we cannot restore our own innocence; and morality is never enough... We can only look to the promise of God, recognising what we are from what he is, and seeking innocence from the one who alone is innocent, and whose love forgives before and beyond what we are able to receive.

We believe that this is indeed the great truth enacted in Christ's cross; by virtue of which we have a new founding pact, a 'new testament'. Of course, Jesus is – as Girard shows brilliantly - 'the scapegoat'; that is no accident. He enters willingly and knowingly, as victim, into that age-old, ancestral and archaic pattern of emissary victimisation, so that man's worst - the violence, the appropriative rivalry, the drive to power, the self-affirmation and the religious self-deceiving - may be illuminated for us by the revelation of God's best, by the very likeness of God as forgiving Love, wondrously realised, converting the heart, procuring the knowledge of the truth that sets us free.

Here we see supremely – and see better, perhaps, for reading some Girardian anthropology - what St Paul calls theologically 'the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ'. (2 *Corinthians* 4: 6)

May that light be our light this Lent, and our Easter dawn. Amen.