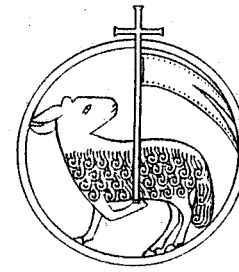


Where are we now, then? Here is St. John saying seemingly contradictory things in the same short epistle: “*If we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves*” . . . and “*Those who have been born of God do not sin*” . . . But then, that is the wonder of Scripture. We can never choose one part at the expense of another to labour our own point. Proof texts are inadequate in themselves and often enough a travesty of the truth, in isolation. We need the full context, the whole vista of the bible from Genesis to the book of Revelation, in order to grasp even a fraction of God’s revealed truth. His ways and thoughts are *not* like ours and we can only expect to see through a glass darkly here below. We know alright we are sinners so let’s not pretend. Yet our truest desire *is* to cease from sin - to be perfect in fact as our heavenly Father is perfect. This Jesus has enjoined on us. Therefore with St. Paul we cry out: “*The good that I would, I do not and the evil that I would not, that I do.*” And we also affirm, with Paul, that it is Jesus alone who can save us from sin, “*the body of this death*” as he terms it. Jesus, we know of a surety, does this to the uttermost.

Being a Christian then, is nothing to do with getting a quick fix from Jesus to carry us through life (and death?) healthy, whole and happy, and without any effort on our part. Have a look at the Sermon on the Mount again if the point needs labouring. (*Matthew chapters 5-7*). As is made quite clear there, we are to be perfect and our righteousness must exceed anything the spiritually athletic have ever achieved before us if we hope, that is, to get anywhere near the Kingdom of Heaven.

A recipe for despair? No, rather an incentive to place all our confidence in Jesus, on whom faith depends from start to finish, so that we may resolutely run the race set before us. (*cf Hebrews 12. 1-2.*) Never mind the paradoxes and impossibilities. As the poet Robert Browning said: “*Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp or what’s a heaven for?*” And in heaven of course, sin is definitely and decidedly done away with. Not thinking of ourselves then more highly than we ought, let us with humility and aided by God’s grace, aim high.



FAITH praying and believing ON THE EARTH

WHAT’S A HEAVEN FOR? CONFRONTING SIN.

“*STAND in awe and sin not,*” the Psalmist says. But who can refrain from sinning to order? “*Go, and sin no more,*” Jesus said to the woman accused of adultery. (*John 8 1-11*). No amount of stone-throwing could have cured that poor soul of whatever things she might happen to have done wrong. Instead, the penetrating presence of the Living Lord compelled her accusers to slink off in guilt, and enabled her to find forgiveness and the grace to amend.

That is what Jesus does for us. He begins by convincing us of our sinfulness, with no glossing over, as though sin didn’t matter or wasn’t there. Before his unutterable holiness we *know* we are sinners, even if it isn’t fashionable to say so these days. Without him, in fact, we can do nothing to save ourselves from sin and from niggling feelings of guilt. So Jesus convinces us. Then he absolves us and sets us on the way to sanctity empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Facing up to the not-too-nice side of ourselves is anything but pleasant of course. That is why we are so good at pretending to ourselves and other people that we are not as we really are. But sooner or later it will out. We come to see that we are all tarred with a similar sort of brush. Yet, with what hardly hidden relish, we gloat over the publicised misdemeanours of others in the tabloid press. Pause a moment: “*Let the one who is without blemish be the first to throw a stone*”, Jesus says.

Yes, “*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*” (Romans 3.23). Paul is absolute here. He is claiming that not only the pagans - the outsiders beyond the pale - have sinned, but even the ultra religious, God’s special chosen and redeemed ones. Carrying this to its logical conclusion, he is claiming that every single person needs to be saved in Christ, and we who now profess to know the Lord must in our turn take heed lest we fall. Though most certainly, as believers, we can rejoice in the assurance of salvation, Scripture does not allow us to rest on our laurels. Sin remains an ongoing possibility because of our God-given freedom. (cf *Hebrews 10. 19-31; Romans 6*).

Often enough the bible reminds us of our universal sinfulness; not to lead us to despair but rather to a state of sober realism and vigilance. Solomon at the dedication of the temple, knows full well that the people will not always remain faithful and so pleads on their behalf:

“If they sin against you . . . for there is no one who does not sin . . . if they repent with all their heart and soul in the land of their enemies . . . then hear, in heaven your dwelling place . . . ”(1 Kings 8. 46-49)

In the Book of Job, Eliphaz the Temanite confronts his suffering friend with the all too obvious fact of our sinful human condition: “*Can mortals be righteous before God? Can human beings be pure before their Maker?*” (Job 4.17)

The Book of Proverbs baldly exclaims: ‘*Who can say “I have made my heart clean; I am pure from my sin?”*’ (Proverbs 20. 9), and Ecclesiastes 7. 20 makes reply: ‘*Surely, there is no one on earth so wise as to do good without ever sinning*’.

But maybe we are tempted to say: true enough, that’s how it was before Christ, in Old Testament times; things are different now . . . Yes and No. Take a look again at the first Letter of John, 1. 8.-10.

If we say we have no sin , we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faith-

ful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

It’s the same pattern there as in Solomon’s time: the well-nigh inevitable lapsing into sin (even *after* conversion and baptism), but with genuine repentance on our part and the will to amend, the way back can be opened to us again by God’s mercy.

At once though, St. John hastens to add that he is not meaning to encourage sin. Far from it. His aim is rather to save us from despair. (1 John 2.1-2).

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

Just as sin is universal, so also in Christ is salvation. That’s the difference between Old Testament and New. Jesus gives us the remedy. John seems to be gentler here than the author of Hebrews: “*If we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgement*”. (Hebrews 10 . 26-7).

The operative word is of course “deliberately”. How could an all-holy God glibly pass over grievous sin, wilfully committed without remorse by those who had already known his merciful love and received his healing forgiveness?

We might also be tempted to ask though, how any truly redeemed Christian (even anybody at all) could possibly commit that sort of sin. Here we actually find St. John to be in agreement with us: “*Those who have been born of God do not sin,*” he says, “*because God’s seed abides in them; they cannot sin because they have been born of God*”: (1 John 3.9), and a little later: “*We know that those who are born of God do not sin, but the One who was born of God (ie Jesus the Son of God) protects them*”.