

Have Mercy On Me A Sinner
Good Friday
2 April 2010

St John Chrysostom was the greatest preacher of the 4th century. In fact his last name is a nickname meaning the golden mouthed. He had a way of laying bare the evils of the Eastern Roman Empire, and his hearers personal complicity in them.

On one occasion he used a striking illustration. There was a man, he said, who used to love to attend the games. The part he particularly liked to watch was when an animal gored one of the athletes, or when a gladiator wounded one of his opponents. This love of blood sports was something he easily integrated with his Christian faith. Then one day he found himself in great personal danger, and called on Christ to save him. Jesus appeared before him covered in gashes and gore, and barely able to move. I want to help you, Jesus said, but I cant because what you loved to watch has done this to me.

Out of the spirituality of the Byzantine world that John Chrysostom belonged to has come the most famous Christian prayer after the Lords prayer, the Jesus prayer. "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me a sinner." For many years I shied away from it. It seemed too penitential, too sin bound in its focus, too hang dog in its outlook on Christian living. But lately the Jesus prayer is growing on me. The more I reflect on life, with whatever shreds of wisdom I can summon up, the more it seems appropriate. Maybe I am coming to appreciate what T S Eliot meant when he wrote in *Little Gidding*:

Let me disclose the gifts reserved for age...
At last, the rending pain of re-enactment
Of all you have done, and been; the shame
Of motives late revealed, and the awareness
Of things ill done and done to other's harm
Which once you took for exercise of virtue.
Then fools' approval stings, and honour stains.
From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit
Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire

So I must come to terms with one's personal complicity with evil, and the problem that poses for God. I have been reluctant to do that for many years, thinking that western Christianity had rather over done that side of things. In my growing up years it seemed as though some brands of Christian religion were majoring in Crossianity, and an obsession with sin that was unhelpful, and off centre with a balanced, optimistic Christianity. But I now see there is an issue there, and one that is unavoidable if you are preaching on Good Friday. For the

cross puts in front of us the doctrine of the atonement – what Christ did to make us at one-with-God.

Recent takes on the atonement have focused on the way Christ overcomes our estrangement from God, or the way in which God absorbs in himself our anger with him. In these the stress is on God having to justify himself to us. But what about what we have done to anger God, to estrange ourselves from God, to cause him to turn away from us in sorrow and disappointment? The prophets point out to us in unmistakable terms the way in which God confronted his chosen people in wrath, so that they would be cleansed by his terrible, purifying love. Do we think we deserve different treatment? Or that God has changed his operating style in order to fit in with the best practice codes of progressive education theory?

What evil does is to put a kink in the way the world works, and what God has to do then is to rebalance the world through his wise justice. That happens through the operations of Divine providence on this side of death, and through the last judgement on the other side of death. Our personal complicity in evil, our sin, cannot be just magicked away. God cannot just declare an amnesty and say, well to me it is as though that never happened. God is patient with us, God is compassionate, and God is forgiving. We know that, and indeed it is the charter of our spiritual survival. But our sin generates what Easter religions call bad karma, and God has to do something about it, and that is very much what Jesus Christ is about in his Good Friday ministry.

On the cross an exchange took place. In ways that we still are coming to understand the full meaning of, he stood in the way of humankind's accumulated sin, and took the brunt of it. What was coming to us he took the responsibility for, and copped the punishment. It is rather like a friend who pleads guilty for a crime we committed, and goes to prison instead of us, so that we can remain free. I guess a friend who did that for us would be hoping that we would make some major changes in our life as a result of our surprise and gratitude.

There is another dimension to it as well. The fall of humankind, its rebellion against God has released the power of evil into the world. Its reigning power is to be seen at so many levels of life in our world. But in a remarkable way the root of its power is now cut at the source as it were by the crucifixion. It can still wreak immense havoc, but it can never now storm the ramparts of the human project, take over completely in human affairs, and call the shots in the ordering of life on this planet. The full power of it is now held back, so that its wrecking potential has circumscribed limits around it. It is now a bounded reality. What is more its time is almost up. When Jesus has completed the number of his elect, has created by resurrection a sufficient number of redeemed and rescued junior brothers and

sisters, he will return, and will draw history to a close. Evil will have run out of time, for in the fullness of the kingdom neither it, nor its followers will be allowed.

For now the seductive power of sin, with all its empty promises, continues to exercise fascinating attraction. That is the other side of the coin of continuing human freedom. But it is a hollow siren call for it has no content within it. It feeds parasitically off the good. The cross has somehow called its bluff, has made it stand out in clear relief as an exposed sham. It is the measure of outstanding goodness, and by that standard what was once complacently accepted as tolerable around here is now obliged to slink off into the shabby corner where it truly belongs.

I began with an arresting parable from one of John Chrysostom's sermons. Its key motif is that Christ is now abroad in our world as an incognito presence, inviting our compassion and generosity, and also vulnerable to our hard heartedness. His judgement and mercy are now somehow tied up with our responses to those who suffer. We are not so much to be doormats to human need, people who need to be needed, but are rather to be those who show in action that they understand that cross bearing is also our responsibility. What he did to break the long reign of sin is something we can have a small part in also.