

Resurrection and Sin

A sermon preached by the *Revd Dr Mark Butchers* at St Peter's, Wolvercote, at 10.00am on Sunday 6th May, 2012

This sermon is part 2 of a sermon I preached two weeks ago about resurrection and creation. Today I want to build on that and focus on the nature of sin, God's response to it and what the resurrection might have to say about it.

First of all, let's think about where sin comes from and what it might be. Personally I can't believe that sin originated in the forbidden eating of a fruit by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Nor that that sin has been passed down the generations, so that each baby is born intrinsically sinful – the doctrine of original sin. I look at babies and think, no, that surely can't be right. They are born with potential; they bring joy, light, delight (as well as quite a bit of hard work). There is an essential goodness about the birth of a baby, which is very different from original sin.

So let me put an alternative to you. At some point in the process of evolution, some animals evolved into beings capable of self-awareness, choice, spirituality, worship. Undoubtedly this was a gradual process, but still one with a definite before and after. Before, there were only animals who acted purely on instinct and focussed solely on the material. After, some animals had become personal conscious beings capable of choice and aware of the spiritual. On this planet, we are those personal conscious beings, but it's highly likely there are other personal conscious beings on other planets in the universe.

The process of evolution inevitably bred instincts of self-preservation in animals – 'me-first' instincts necessary to survive. These are natural and in no way sinful, because they are instinctive. Animals don't choose to behave in that way. When human beings evolved from animals on this planet, those 'me-first' instincts of self-preservation remained within us. They are part of us today. But our new spiritual awareness also gave us a higher dimension – spiritual values of self-giving, concern for others, awareness of community and the desire to serve.

Personal conscious beings like us are thus a mixture of animal instincts and spiritual values. In animals those instincts are morally neutral – an animal can't sin because it can't make moral choices. But we can make choices. Being able to choose means that we can consciously, actively pursue those animal instincts. We can opt for me-first, self-preserving actions, and that pulls us away from those higher spiritual values. This is what I would say sin is: choosing to foster and live within those animal instincts, and rejecting the Holy Spirit's attempts to guide, inspire and prod us in the opposite direction.

And maybe this is how we can interpret the Garden of Eden story: the serpent is the voice of animal instinct inside us drawing us towards our baser side and away from the higher spiritual values, symbolised by the rules God sets Adam and Eve. Like us they have choice, and they choose to follow the call of animal instinct, and thus sin.

So that's my take on how sin emerged and how we human beings are pushed and pulled this way and that by our baser me-first instincts on the one hand and higher God-given spiritual values on the other. Let's now turn to the question of what God does about this. Two things I would say.

First, through Jesus he gives us an example of what a human life could look like when it is entirely focussed on higher spiritual values, and consistently chooses them rather than our baser me-first animal instincts. In word and action Jesus models this for us. And he asks us to emulate that in our own lives. Of course because we are not Jesus, not God incarnate or the human face of God on earth, we don't manage it. Even when we admire the example he sets, we can't live up to it. We fall short. And even many of those who met Jesus face to face ignored his example or found it so threatening that they had him killed.

Example alone is not enough. So Christians have always believed that God does a second thing about sin, though they have differed as to exactly what. There is one view, which I find profoundly unhelpful, distasteful, and even dangerous to the mission of the Church. It goes like this: human beings have sinned; sin has to be punished by God; the only fitting punishment is death; so human beings are condemned to cease to be. But God is merciful as well as just. So he sends his Son to die on our behalf, taking our punishment on himself.

I don't like this at all. It is slightly better if you say that God came himself in the Son to die. Then at least you get away from the ghastly notion of the Father sacrificing his Son, like Abraham almost did to Isaac, and instead have God sacrificing himself. But even so, we're still tied in to a God who has to deal out punishment to human beings, and that to me is not a God I want to believe in. Sadly, I would say, it is often this set of ideas which has come across to non-Christians, and quite understandably they don't want to know. That's why I say it is not only distasteful, but dangerous for the mission of the Church.

But is there an alternative? I think there is and I think resurrection is an important part of it. For me, the cross stands as a symbol in history of human sin throughout the ages. There Jesus was forced to endure the worst of what human beings are capable of. What he did and didn't do in response is important. He didn't run away from it trying to preserve his own life. Instead: 'not my will, but thine be done' and 'into your hands I commit my Spirit'. Nor did he call down curses upon his persecutors, throwing back evil for evil, hate for hate. Instead: 'Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.'

In other words, he took what was thrown at him, he bore it and died doing so. On the face of it, his death, like the death of so many other persecuted victims, was the triumph of sin and evil. But what God says in Jesus's resurrection is 'no, that is not the case. Just as death is overcome by life, so sin is overcome by my power for good. Sin will not have the last word.'

Quite often in our services, just before Communion, we say or sing 'O Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'. These are words from John 1.29, 'Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.' To me they are quite difficult words, because they can support the view of the cross I don't like – Jesus as a sacrificial lamb being punished on our behalf, dying in our place to take away our sin.

But the Greek word translated as 'takes away' (aivrwn) can be translated differently. The root idea is 'lift up' or 'carry', and you can see how that gets extended to the idea of taking away or removing. But carrying doesn't necessarily need to mean taking away. It can just mean holding or bearing. So we could translate John 1.29 as 'Behold the Lamb of God who holds or bears the sin of the world'. And indeed that is reflected in the words we'll say in today's service: 'Jesus, bearer of our sins, have mercy on us.'

I have no doubt that one day God will take away, remove, overcome, heal our sins; and I think we're given a glimpse of that in Jesus' resurrection – a window onto the future. But in the meantime, in this middle between the Alpha of creation and the Omega of resurrection, I find the idea that God *holds* our sins rather attractive.

It may well be that this is what Jesus is doing on the cross: bearing the sin that is thrown at him in the sense of holding it, even absorbing it; and, as he does so, working hard to transform it, by giving back good for evil, love for hate: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' And similarly with us here and now, God holds us, the whole of us, including our sin. He knows what we're like, he knows we are pulled one way by our baser me-first instincts and the other way by the Holy Spirit towards higher spiritual values. He knows we often succumb to the former, but because he loves us infinitely, he holds us as we are, warts and all, sinful and good. And through that holding of us, he is constantly working to inspire us to bring better things out of the not so good within us. Any taking away of sins, any transformation of them, is only ever partial in this life; the final taking away will be God's resurrection gift to us beyond death.

So today in part 2, I've offered some thoughts about the origins and nature of sin and about God's reaction to it: in Jesus' life, giving us an example to follow; in Jesus' death, showing that he holds human sinfulness in his love; and in Jesus' resurrection, showing that ultimately sin will not have the last word; it will be taken away. We are, if you like, work in progress. But through Christ's resurrection, we can trust that he who created us, loves and holds us as we are now, and will ultimately take away, transform, heal all that is sinful within us.

Amen.