

The boys from Edlington

21 2 10

Almighty and everlasting God,
you hate nothing that you have made
and forgive the sins of all those who are penitent:
create and make in us new and contrite hearts
that we, worthily lamenting our sins
and acknowledging our wickedness,
may receive from you, the God of all mercy,
perfect remission and forgiveness.

My text may be found in Psalm 51 verse 6:

‘Indeed, I was born guilty,
A sinner when my mother conceived me.’

Back in January when we were still reeling from the after-shocks from the Haitian earthquake, we were subjected to a second wave of horror from the sentencing of two unnamed boys who at the time of the incident on 4th April 2009 were just 10 and 11-years-old. The boys were being fostered in the South Yorkshire village of Edlington. Their crime was to lure two other children of a similar age into a secluded spot and to subject them to 90 minutes of torture, degradation and humiliation resulting in serious physical injury to one of their victims. The brothers came from a home that was described as ‘toxic’, where both father and mother failed in their duty and responsibility to cherish and nurture their sons.

The details of the boys' home-life which produced such anti-social behaviour culminating in the deliberate and sustained assault and abuse are too awful to dwell on. Suffice it to say it was vicious. But what I should like to focus on this morning at the start of Lent is the nature of sin and the possibility of repentance.

My text taken from Psalm 51 presents a fairly bleak view of humanity:

'Indeed, I was born guilty,
A sinner when my mother conceived me'

The view is one of original sin, that the sin of Adam's and Eve's disobedience is inherited by all humanity and that from the start, we are all sinners and all have fallen short of our true potential. It is a harsh, pessimistic view of childhood. That a child had to be disciplined to become a responsible, conscientious adult, that according to the Book of Proverbs, to spare the rod will spoil the child. I am old enough to have been brought up in a home and school environment where my mother was not afraid to slap me and my teachers could have beaten me with a slipper or a cane if I had so misbehaved to have merited it; unsurprisingly, I was only slipped once – for talking in an Art class. Nowadays, you touch a child at your peril even if you are parent or a teacher.

But however we discipline our children, there is a necessary lesson to learn: the difference between right and wrong, what is good and bad behaviour. And this is precisely what sin is: sin is simply wrong-doing. I make no apology for constantly repeating the fact that Christianity had grown out of Judaism and what distinguishes Judaism is its sense of right and wrong, the moral law, the torah embodied in the ten commandments but enshrined in fact in 613 of them.

Christianity, therefore, has its roots in a strong tradition of distinguishing right from wrong. But where Christianity differs from Judaism is that instead of a narrow sense of legalism (i.e. there are rules to determine right conduct in every respect) Jesus offers us the rule of love, a single distinguishing principle which may be expressed in this question: 'Does what we do demonstrate our love of God and our love of neighbour as ourselves?' Now it is not easy to weigh up the consequences of our action in terms of whether we are being truly loving, truly cherishing others and ourselves and thereby loving God by what we do. But in Edlington last April, those two poor boys would not have made two other boys' lives wretched had they been loved by their parents and shown the kindness every child deserves.

As a religion, Christianity is surprisingly down-to-earth. It acknowledges the fact that we all have done wrong in the past and are likely to do wrong in the future. To sin is part of what it means to be alive. But despite our many failings, we don't have to give up in despair. We can always try to be better. What a belief in Christianity does is to inform our conscience, to give us an awareness of right and wrong, a sense of regret at failing and the determination to try to be better in future. And that is what repentance means. It is being aware; it is having our eyes open; it is recognising that we have sinned. Then it is regretting the fact of our sin and it is saying sorry for having sinned and it is trying to do better in the knowledge we are loved and forgiven.

What bothers me about the two boys who are now placed in a secure children's home is their lack of reaction to what they have done; the lack of understanding

of their crime against two other small boys. What bothers me is their total lack of fellow feeling, the absence of empathy for another person's pain. Of course Christianity is an optimistic, positive world-view in which no one is beyond redemption. The question remains whether these lads are still sufficiently open to respond to the love and discipline to make them whole again or has their early treatment turned them into sociopaths forever beyond the pale?

Christianity offers the possibility of universal salvation. No one is beyond the love of God. But the fact is we all have a choice and God will not, cannot, make us love him but if we do, we don't have to be perfect to be loved and accepted by him: he will meet us on the road coming home.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's Dinard

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H: Sermon 21: Edlington

