

FROM BROKENNESS TO WHOLENESS: 10TH SUNDAY B

The teacher asked her class of small children: "What is conscience?" Quick as a flash, one boy piped up: "It's what makes you tell your mother before your sister does." St Paul the Apostle once made a startling comment about his personal struggle to follow his conscience and do the right thing: "I do not understand my own behaviour," he wrote. "I do not act as I mean to, but I do the things that I hate" (Rom 7:15-16) Talk about true confessions! But perhaps he's not the only one to admit that he did not always do what his conscience told him but sometimes went against its guidance. I wonder, in fact, if there's anyone other than Jesus, who has always followed their conscience perfectly and done the most loving thing in every life-situation.

At least Paul was not trying to cover up, find excuses, or blame anyone else for his failures. Unlike the man and woman in our First Reading! We know them as "Adam" and "Eve". But in this poetic and symbolic story about human nature in general, rather than a factual account of the behaviour of the first man and woman that ever lived, they represent you and me. "Adam", then, is Everyman, and "Eve" is Everywoman. As the Dutch Catechism puts it: "The sin of Adam and Eve is closer than we imagine. It is in our own selves."

The part of the story that makes up our First Reading today deals with the fall-out from their disobedience to God and God's commands. They have eaten the forbidden fruit, despite God's lavish gift to them of the whole Eden garden of delights and its trees. In doing so they have forgotten their dependence on God for their very existence. They have refused to accept their right relationship with God as God's creatures. In wanting to be just like God and deciding for themselves what's right and what's wrong, they've simply become, as the saying goes, "too big for their boots".

The effects of their sin are immediate. The details provide a wonderful psychology of sin. Sin causes feelings of fear and shame and guilt. No longer content to be creatures and accept their human limitations, they lose their innocent, trusting relationship with God. They are now ashamed of their God-given bodies, ashamed in the presence of each other, and ashamed before God. Despite God being said to stroll among them in the gentleness of a cool breeze after a long hot day, the man and the woman skulk away from their Creator and hide themselves in the trees (v.8). Then the man attempts to blame God for the mess they are in because it was God who gave him the woman as his partner (v.12). His complaint also illustrates how sin tends to separate people from one another, and how it can even destroy interpersonal relationships. The woman, for her part, protests that the serpent tricked her into eating the forbidden fruit (v.13). What is at work here is a psychology of self-justification and refusal to take the blame for anything.

We seem to be living in an age of blunt consciences. Some drivers run over pedestrians, but instead of stopping to assist the injured, drive on. Family peace is being shattered in some homes by repeated offences of abuse, disrespect and violence. The Women's "Me too" Movement has been disclosing hundreds of instances of sexual assault and even of rape. The "Big Four" Banks and other finance agencies have been "ripping off" many customers

and diddling some of them out of their whole life-savings, leaving them homeless. We hear again and again of wage theft, of employers paying their employees far less than the award wage, and in some instances, paying nothing at all. Then there's the desperate situation of the people of Palestine and Syria, being driven from their homes and livelihoods by the scourge of constant war. Fraud, deceit and distrust abound. Too many people in too many places feel unnoticed, unwanted and rejected. And too many rich people are getting ever richer at the expense of the poor.

That's just a small snapshot of the sins of society today. Just as concerning are the reactions of the offenders, who exchange such lines as these: "Take no responsibility!" "Shrug your shoulders and walk away!" "Blame the boss!" "Blame your childhood!" "Admit nothing!" "It's their word against yours. Deny it!" "Plead not guilty!" "Laugh it off! Just say 'The devil made me do it', or something, anything, other than that you goofed, you did it."

What then, is the answer to all such moral dilemmas and challenges? St Paul puts the question this way. "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body doomed to death?" His answer to his own question is this: "God - thanks be to him - through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Rom 7:24-25) Paul is saying in other words: "Salvation, or redemption, must come from God because it must come from a greater source of being and of healing power" (Monica Hellwig).

This is the healing power that we experience in an ongoing personal, family and community relationship with Jesus Christ as our Saviour. His role as our Liberator/Saviour could hardly be better expressed than in these words of Colossians 1:13-14, words to us of comfort and hope: "It is he who has rescued us from the ruling force of darkness and has transferred us to the kingdom of the Son that he loves, and in him we enjoy our freedom, the forgiveness of sin."

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