

ENVY

a sermon in a series of reflections on the Seven Deadly Sins

Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford

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Alleluiah! Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed, Alleluiah!

That has been our constant proclamation for the last fifty days. As St Augustine put it 'We are an Easter people, and Alleluiah is our song'.

On Thursday we celebrated the most famous farewell in history: the moment when Jesus ascended into the heavens. But this moment of leave-taking is more of a new beginning than an end. St Paul is quite clear that when Jesus ascended into the heavens, it was that he might fill the universe. Our anthems proclaim that God is gone up with a triumphant shout, and St Luke describing the event at the end of his gospel tells us that as Jesus ascended his disciples worshipped him and then went back to Jerusalem full of joy - expectantly awaiting the promised gifts of the Holy Spirit. And we too are in this Pentecost season - about to celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit and the outpouring of the gifts which God still lavishes on us.

Curious then, that just as we are filled with eager anticipation following the biblical narrative as the church is about to take shape and become the agency of spiritual renewal which will transform the world - curious that at this moment we are invited to consider the seven deadly or cardinal sins.. Or perhaps not so curious. Maybe its at these moments of spiritual uplift when we are most vulnerable to the very opposite. With exuberance and elation can come arrogance, pride, complacency or insensitivity. I needn't go on. we no doubt all have personal examples of what I mean which we can readily bring to mind.

This last week I have been leading a retreat in Chelmsford when we reflected on those remarkable post-resurrection appearances in St John's Gospel when Jesus appears to his disciples. So often the disciples don't recognise Jesus at first. Mary at the tomb on Easter morning thinks the Lord is the gardener; the fishermen on the lake don't recognise the stranger on the shore who hails them; and Thomas famously earns the soubriquet 'Doubting Thomas' for his failure to recognise the new reality of Easter. But John ends his Gospel in a most curious way. You remember that there is a conversation between Jesus and Peter, when the terrible betrayal of Jesus caused by Peter's denial of his Lord is forgiven. The two men are reconciled as Jesus says to Peter, 'Follow me' and 'Feed my sheep'.. A wonderful moment on which to end the gospel. But then John adds the this curious footnote.

Peter turned and saw the disciple Jesus loved following them - the one who had leaned on his breast at the supper - and Peter said to Jesus : 'What about him Lord?' Jesus answered: 'If I want him to stay behind until I come, what does it matter to you? You are to follow me',

Peter has been reconciled with Jesus. He has been given his marching orders. He is the rock on which the church is to be built. You can almost hear the keys of the Kingdom jangling at his side. And yet he is filled with envy. He looks back and sees the disciple whom Jesus loves - indeed his bosom companion - and forgiven human being though he is and given every possible advantage as the slate of his past is wiped clean, Peter is consumed with envy.

In a way that final pericope of the gospel of John is a re-assuring insight into human nature. Just as the church, is as it were, being founded, when the pastoral mandate to feed Christ's sheep has been handed on, the chief pastor is consumed with envy. Thank God that isn't the last word about either Peter or the church, but it is a salutary reminder of how even the best of us have little reason to boast: no cause for pride.

Envy was brought into the list of deadly sins by Pope Gregory 1 who reflected on the eight evil thoughts compiled by the fourth century monk Evagrius of Pontus. In Gregory's list of seven sins the sainted pope combined the sins of despair and dejection, and the sins of vainglory and hubris - and added envy. Gregory's list became the standard list of sins, which Thomas Aquinas defends and reinforces in his *Summa Theologica*.

Envy, like greed and lust, is characterised by insatiable desire and is similar to jealousy (indeed it is often confused with jealousy) in that both the envious person and the jealous person feel discontent towards someone else's advantages and blessings - even when, as in Peter's case, unreserved and undeserved blessings have already been lavished upon him. Maybe a difference between envy and jealousy is that the envious person also desires whatever status, ability or reward they covet in another. Using the word covet in this context reminds us that the idea of envy appears in an even more ancient list of dos and don'ts than even Gregory the Great's list of sins - namely the Ten Commandments. You will remember the commandment:

You shall not covet your neighbour's house. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, nor his servant, nor his ox nor his donkey - nor anything that is his.

Somehow I feel envy is a more insidious sin than jealousy. Jealousy seems to be a full blooded emotion that utterly consumes us, and may lead to rage and worse. Cain killing his brother Abel is often thought to be the result of envy, but such extreme rage and catastrophic consequences, I would connect with jealousy. By contrast, envy - coveting the advantages and blessings of another - simmers away, causing resentment rather than rage. Envy can more easily be kept under wraps, even if not under control, though it will often find occasion to express itself in an unkind remark, or an uncalled for sleight.

Maybe the two examples we heard this morning from scripture will help us characterise this particular sin. In our first reading where the young David is acclaimed for his prowess and achievements ahead of King Saul (the king who is at the best of times a moody character) Saul is consumed with envious resentment at the younger man's achievements. Maybe as Saul moves to kill David, - throwing a spear at him - envy moves to jealousy, if I'm right that jealousy is the more red-blooded of the two sins.

On the other hand the elder brother in Luke's parable of the Prodigal Son is in the background. He is in the background of the story because the limelight is reserved for the younger brother who swans off to the far country and wastes a fortune, before coming to that self-recognition that is the basis of any conversion or change of heart. As a result of his self-recognition the prodigal returns home, contrite and remorseful, begging his father's forgiveness. At that moment grace abounds, and the father, who has been longing for his son's return and daily watching out for him, runs to greet him. He clothes him, adorns him, hugs him and kills the fatted calf in his honour.

Of course the onlooking elder brother is consumed with envy. He is not only in the background of the story, he is also in the background, as he feels it, of his father's affection. Because this extravagant outpouring of love on his wastrel brother has never been lavished on him. He doesn't see, because he doesn't feel, that he is loved by the father in the same way. I hope he is convinced by the words of his father, which are as generous a blessing as any fatted calf.

My son you are with me always and all I have is yours.

Which perhaps brings me to a final point about sins and sinning - envy, jealousy, or any of the other failings which are part of our human condition. What do we do about our sin? Sometimes we have to be reduced to the gutter or the pigsty, since it is only when we reach rock bottom that we see ourselves as we truly are. But there are less drastic, but equally effective, ways of self-recognition. I remember the first time I made my confession, as a twelve year old. When my fellow cathedral choristers had trooped off to make confession to a priest before our confirmation (individually - not group confession!) I had declined to follow suit. There are certain things that even a twelve year old is not going to confide in anyone else! Certain things that have to remain a guilty secret. But carrying guilty secrets can be quite a burden and so sometime later I asked a priest on the cathedral staff if he would hear my confession. I didn't want to confess my shortcomings - but I needed to. I can remember still the feelings as I read my self-accusing list of peccadillos, as my cheeks reddened as I knelt there and the sweat poured off me. But most of all I remember the sense of relief, the almost palpable sense of a weight being lifted from me as I heard the priest say the words: *By the authority given to me I absolve you from all your sins, in the name of the Father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit. Go in peace the Lord has put away your sin.*

Sacramental confession won't do for every one - but I like the traditional Anglican approach: *All may, none must, some should.*

But however we do our self scrutiny, and ask for God's forgiveness - and the church's liturgy nearly always includes a form of confession - it needs to move beyond the merely formulaic. Some people if they don't have a confessor nevertheless use a spiritual director, or a friend maybe - though friends are often too kind, and tell us only what we want to hear!

Peter after his courtyard denials of Jesus needed to be brought face to face with himself as well as the person he had wronged. Although Peter went out and wept bitterly when Jesus looked at him and saw him through and through, at that moment of self recognition Peter was also healed, forgiven, loved. It is at such moments of self recognition that we are healed of, and forgiven, our envy, our jealousy, our pride. We will no doubt return to these, or other sins, again and again (as Peter looking enviously at John at the end of the gospel so vividly reminds us) for we are not easily cured of our capacity to sin. But we believe in a God who, whatever we do, whoever we are, wherever we go, loves us, heals us, forgives us, and restores us. Even there in the pig sty of our inhumanity - *even there shall thy hand lead me and thy right hand shall hold me.*

Thank God

Amen