

Sermon 423 - Out of the Shadow

Abstract: If Bregman's thesis that we are fundamentally good is correct, it alters our whole doctrinal framework.

Rutger Bregman*1, who famously described global capitalists at Davos who refused to pay their taxes as "Discussing putting out a fire without any mention of water", has published a new book which, in spite of his dim view of plutocrats, concludes that humanity is fundamentally good rather than fundamentally wicked; and he goes on to say that, human nature being what it is, if we think something of ourselves we are likely to reinforce it. So that if Christians keep telling themselves and each other that we are all wicked, we are more likely to become more wicked. That is a heavy burden for any institution to bear. It might be that our view of humanity as wicked is causing avoidable damage.

The history of our self-abasement is easily told. Plato, the first great philosopher, conceived of earthly existence as being an imperfect copy of other-worldly reality so that humanity, and everything else, was fundamentally imperfect. After the death of Jesus a brand of degraded Platonism, known as Gnosticism, swept the Graeco-Roman world, proclaiming, heretically, that the soul was sublime while the body was corrupt. From there it was easy for Saint Augustine to develop the Biblically unwarranted doctrine of original sin. Saint Thomas Aquinas, who drew his inspiration from Plato's most brilliant pupil, Aristotle, restored the ideas of the fundamental goodness of humanity and the necessary interlocking of the spiritual and the physical, but Martin Luther's re-reading of Saint Augustine swept all that away so that the human default of wickedness was restored such that many Protestants struggled to account in any way for the phenomenon of human goodness: Jesus had not died to save us from the death which was the consequence of the selfish exercise of free will; he had actually died to save each of us from our individual sins of commission or, anyway, some of us, "the elect". This, in turn downgraded the relevance of human activity to the marginal.

Jesus acknowledged the presence of wickedness but assigned this to the unexplained existence of an evil force, as did Saint Paul most of the time but, as with many other issues, Saint Paul did not have a settled view on the nature of humanity and wickedness.

If Bregman is correct, then this pulls apart the whole of our doctrinal framework, based on the assumption that the purpose of the death of Jesus was to wipe our sinful slates clean. With reference to today's Readings - yes, I have got there at last - how do we relate the activity of the Holy Spirit to our earthly state? If we are fundamentally wicked and if our moral actions count for nothing then the function of the Spirit is, at best, to act as some kind of virtual prison warder, keeping us within the narrow bounds of our sinfulness, not allowing us to do our worst. But all the evidence of the Bible, in our two Readings as elsewhere, is that the Spirit played an absolutely crucial, animating role; and we will learn next Sunday, at Pentecost, what that really meant, and what it means now.

Bregman's claim is advanced in spite of his acknowledgement of and long agonising over the Shoah under whose ever-present shadow he laboured. Because of our abilities, he says, we are capable of the worst evils that have ever been perpetrated in creation but, still, on balance, he thinks that our fundamental characteristic is goodness, to which I would add three observations: first, we know pretty well now that evil begets evil, that abused children have a stronger propensity to be child abusers; secondly, we are learning that criminal behaviour is determined in part by the structure of our brains; and, following on from that, thirdly, we really have no idea about the boundary between wickedness and madness. Since Darwin, we have been led to believe that our selfish genes determine that we will compete for resources and mates in a single-mindedly selfish way; but it might just be that genetics is more important than free will in making moral decisions. Whether or not that is true, we are learning that even forest trees form societies for mutual benefit and support*2.

So why have we been so supine in the face of the charge of fundamental wickedness? I got a strong clue a couple of weeks ago when Government Ministers began to hint that the real problem with the economy is that workers were too content with their furlough pay and were too idle to return to work. In spite of their own spectacular excesses, this is the theory held by the rich and powerful against the poor and weak. We should not be surprised. For decades poor people and people like me who have disabilities, have been characterised as scroungers unprepared to work or to contribute to society. The truth is that poor clerical and civic leadership finds it easier to control people on the grounds that they are wicked than to sponsor their growth as positive, creative people. Creativity and goodness invariably threaten hierarchy. The wickedness default is a boon to ecclesiastic authorities and governments because it justifies their tyranny.

King David, on his deathbed, associated justice with the glory of the Lord's Spirit and Ephesians reinforces the magnitude of God's power. If our Readings are correct, then it cannot be that such Godly power must fail in the face of our intrinsic wickedness; it must succeed. And if it succeeds then our wholeness, attained through the death and Resurrection of Jesus, makes a nonsense of Plato and, yes, Saint Augustine and the 16th Century Reformers.

All around us, people are talking about the better world we need to create when we come out of lock-down: saying that we cannot go back to being as we were; saying that we must properly reward essential workers and limit the wealth of those in the financial sector; saying that we will not allow our health and social services to be vandalised in the name of financial orthodoxy; and saying that we must learn from the virtue we have cultivated. On this last point, it was Aristotle who said that the foundation of a good life was to live virtuously, a point made independently and as forcefully by Jesus. But if we are to create this better world from the ruins of the pandemic, then the place to start is with an understanding of ourselves and the mission of the church. The Church, the body of Christ, of which we are members, is empowered in the Holy Spirit to do good in the world in the name of Jesus; it is not the monopoly possessor of a warped insurance policy that somehow guarantees that we will be admitted into heaven.

If Bregman is right we can walk away from the shadow of our self-imposed gloom and use our energy to make a better world.

*Bregman, Rutger: Humankind: A Hopeful History

*Peter Wohlleben: The Hidden Life of Trees