

A clergyman was once visiting a psychiatric patient in a hospital. It puzzled him that the patient seemed perfectly lucid and sane, and yet he was informed that the man would never be released. So the minister asked to see the psychiatrist who was caring for him. He was shocked to discover that this psychiatrist was in fact the patient's brother. He questioned him about whether it was an abuse of power to keep his own brother locked up. The psychiatrist replied, 'It's the only thing we can do. Sometimes he escapes, puts on a white coat and passes himself off as a doctor. Once he was identified as he was just about to operate on someone and would probably have killed them. But my brother's condition has made him amoral; he is not aware that he's doing anything wrong.'

In the Gospel today we read a rather surprising and disturbing account about Jesus (which clearly troubled the other evangelists, because they omitted it). Jesus' family turn up at one of his public gatherings and want to take him away because they are convinced that he is out of his mind. They may have been worried for his safety as his words and works drew such crowds to him, and wondered where it was all going to lead. We must not assume that the family knew all about his special calling and identity in the early days of his ministry. That would come later. But at this stage they may well have been concerned not just about his welfare but about his lifestyle choice. Staying at home or close to your family and following the family trade or business was the norm in that society. Going off in an itinerant fashion as Jesus did was considered very bad form, irresponsible, and embarrassing for the family. The family of Jesus may also have known about the views of the respected Jewish leaders, who were maintaining that Jesus' good works were through the power of evil, from Beelzebul or Satan, the prince of devils. This would have troubled them deeply, so what else could they do but try to take charge of him and bring him home?

Jesus calls the scribes' accusation against him as blasphemy. Usually, blasphemy means saying rude things about God, but Jesus is saying that their blasphemy is much worse. It is deadly. When people who were sick came to Jesus, he touched them, prayed or simply declared them to be healed, and they were healed. To say that this was not of the Holy Spirit, but of the power of evil was an unforgivable sin. Anyone who could not recognise the goodness of what Jesus was doing, would not recognise the badness of what they were

saying. These religious experts were clearly so amoral that they could not tell the difference between good and evil.

Throughout the Bible we read of the importance of individual responsibility. We are all responsible for our attitudes and our actions. However, this has not stopped the development of theories about how we have all inherited the sin we read about in our first reading, that we humans are all by nature sinners.

The Genesis story represents an early conviction that God must have intended human beings to be perfect, even immortal. He placed them in a paradise world represented by the Garden of Eden, and he gave them free will to decide how to behave. Being human, they inevitably disobeyed his command, wanting in their curiosity to explore the ways that lead to trouble and evil. So God punished them by taking away their immortality, threw them out of paradise, so that they and all their descendants would have to work to survive, have the experience of pain, and live for only a limited number of years. It is telling us about the negative capabilities in human nature and the problems that are caused in when we are self-centred, greedy, and lustful for power.

If there is such a thing as 'original sin,' it is probably better symbolised in the following chapter of Genesis, chapter 4, in the story of Cain and Abel, the first sons of Adam and Eve. This is where the word 'sin' is mentioned for the first time. Cain is jealous of his brother Abel and so he kills him. Here is an image of violence as a solution or norm for human beings settling their differences throughout history. It is still very much with us. But the story of Cain's crime also tells of a God who asserted that violence and killing are not inevitable. Before the murder is committed, God says to Cain, 'If you are not doing right, sin is lurking at the door in its desire for you. *But you can master it.*' (4: 7) But like an addictive drug, so many individuals and civilization itself have not mastered it. Violence, fuelled by hate, has been humanity's drug of choice.

We may often be ashamed of the actions of those who have gone before us, and those who commit terrible deeds today, but sin cannot be inherited. What we have inherited is free will. We have individual responsibility for how we live, what we do, or fail to do. The choice is ours.

As human beings and especially as Christians we have a duty to live responsibly and with a self-giving disposition that helps to create peace, harmony,

solidarity, and with justice for all. We can do this by co-operating with our creator God, whose grace is freely given and abundantly sufficient for us. In the Gospel, Jesus teaches that anyone who does the will of God is a member of his family. It was in following the will of God that Jesus brought peace, joy, forgiveness, and healing to so many. And his loyalty to God ultimately took him to the cross as it led him to confront the self-seeking, unjust, and violent powers of his day. It is by faithfully following Jesus that we discover our true identity, who we are in God. We come to share the *original goodness* of beings who are created in the image and likeness of God. Then we can help to build a world which accords with our loving Father's vision and values, and where the ancient dream of paradise remains no longer a dream, but becomes a growing reality for the earth.