

Blackburn Cathedral

Saturday 3rd March 2018

I want to say something about the relationship between prayer and spirituality.

Spirituality is almost an industry today. Everyone wants to be spiritual these days and you will probably be familiar with people saying that they are ‘spiritual but not religious’. Richard Dawkins has just brought out a book called *Science in the Soul* and is adamant that the feelings and attitudes that he identifies as spiritual belong as much to unbelievers as believers. Spirituality has become part of what we might call the ‘wellness’ movement; a vague but pressing yearning for experiences of wholeness, authenticity and fulfilment. And on the way to this goal people might well adopt practices which are familiar from the traditions of prayer from all over the world: deep breathing and observing the breath; posture, as in yoga; the use of mantras or short memorised phrases to focus the attention, visualisation, concentration on an image or an icon. There is a sense, too, that spirituality has a result. Like going to the gym, the practice of spirituality is meant to make you a better person, to help you with your bad habits, to make you more calmer and more reflective in your relationships with others.

Now I find it difficult to quarrel with much of that. When I was a tutor at Westcott House in Cambridge, responsible for the ministerial formation of Church of England ordinands, I expected them to take spirituality seriously: to have a practice and a pattern which would form them for ministry and build self-awareness and resilience. The *problem* came with the language in which the Christian tradition down the ages has expressed the central issue of the spiritual life, which is the language of sin and virtue. Most of my ordinands didn’t want much to do with any of *that*.

They were not alone. Christians don’t talk about sin much these days, at least the Christians I hang out with don’t. You can still find the more boggle-eyed variety of holy people who go on and on about sin of course, but they are not always the kind of people who would come to a day like this. Of course we formally acknowledge that we are sinners, in the rites of penitence in worship, but the word sin still has a negative, defeatist ring that sits oddly with the spiritual culture of exploration and the quest for authenticity and fulfilment. A version of Christianity which concentrates on sin does not appeal much. And yet.

I began to prepare this address on a day when a man was sentenced to decades in jail for driving a van into worshippers outside a mosque, on a day when it was reported that online fraudsters stole £130 billion last year by bogus e-mails and hacking accounts; and as various proxy wars continued to ruin lives in the middle east.

On top of this my own attempts to pray have for months (years!) been undermined by resentment against particular individuals who have upset me in various ways, and

when I turn to God I often find a sea of my own unresolved anger in the way. In such circumstances a spirituality which ignores human sinfulness seems to me to be not only naively optimistic, but downright irresponsible.

In classical spirituality there is a deep sense that our human nature is flawed and that our spiritual yearnings are frustrated. Living with and suffering that frustration while hoping in Christ for salvation seems to me to be the core of the Christian spiritual life. You don't have to accept Augustine's teaching on the sexual transmission of original sin or buy into the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity to sense this. Any of the classic spiritual writings from East or West down the centuries suggest that prayer is a struggle; that there are temptations and failures along the way, that there are battles and conflicts with ourselves and with other forces – and again you don't need to go down the route of an exaggerated demonology to suggest that in the life of prayer we need persistence, courage and resilience. Prayer as struggle, prayer as conflict, prayer as spiritual warfare is there in the Fathers, East and West, in the mediaeval mystics, in the Puritans and the metaphysical poets, in more recent writers on the spiritual life from Thomas Merton to Mother Teresa to Rowan Williams.

But this gets downplayed in contemporary spirituality whether Christian or free-floating. Spirituality is often contrasted favourably with institutional religion just as experience is favoured over belief, personal authenticity over the imitation of others. I understand that, I am a baby boomer, I am not wholly unsympathetic to the cultural background of the contemporary spiritual quest.

I am also slightly suspicious of that tendency in parts of the Church to reduce spirituality to pious habits. You know the Catholic priest who is frequently drunk and possibly promiscuous, vicious of speech and incapable of any kind of collaboration with others who nevertheless at 7 am in the morning rings the Church bell and says the Daily Office without fail. Or the predatory evangelical, quietly manipulative and deeply in love with his own image who enjoys a quiet time with God from which he gets precise directions from the Lord on how to plan the day ahead to his own advancement and convenience. The point I am making is that rigorous habits of prayer, do not always deliver anymore than a spirituality that ignores struggle.

So I want to take what I can from the current spiritual boom. For example, I have learnt a great deal from Jung's view of the human self as a self in search of integration and wholeness. I find the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and the Enneagram useful in describing the form that wholeness might take for different people with different kinds of imperfect self-hood. I am impressed by the popularity of Mindfulness and the testimonies to its benefits. I am drawn to those strands of the Christian spiritual tradition which see our spiritual life as therapy and healing for wounded selves, and I am slightly repelled by those which bang on about sin and guilt. Yet increasingly I am coming to see some aspects of contemporary spirituality as lacking both rigour and toughness, and I suspect they may play into an over individualised view of the self that is damagingly self-indulgent. The problem is, of course, that we want the benefits of spirituality without the pain.

The very deep rooted idea that the Christian spiritual life is a process of purgation, or purification or even mortification, doing your sinful nature to death, is almost entirely absent today. Take that perhaps excessive note of anguish that we find in a text familiar to Anglicans of a certain vintage:

‘We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, which we from time to time most grievously have committed by thought, word and deed against thy divine majesty, provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation against us. We do earnestly repent and are heartily sorry for these our misdoings; the remembrance of them is grievous unto us; the burden of them is intolerable...’

That once meant something absolutely real to people. It expressed their sense of sin as a weight, dragging them down, a weight which could only be relieved by an intense and repeated immersion in the grace of Christ. Yet if you look at people who have said this prayer over the centuries there is no evidence that it left them depressed and hopelessly undermined or obsessively anxious about their sins and guilt. The prayer worked presumably for William Law and Wilberforce and Archbishop Laud and John Keble and Harriet Monsell and Josephine Butler and Evelyn Underhill and for the present Queen none of whom seem to have suffered from a depressed self-image or a lack of a sense of Christian purpose or mission.

So we must conclude, that it is we who have changed, we who now find it difficult to accept that we are sinners in the sense that the prayer suggests.

The idea that we are fundamentally sinners was expressed with particular clarity by St Augustine who saw the root of sin in Adam and Eve’s prideful rebellion against God. His view of pride as the root of sin has become a very deep-seated view in Western culture with far-reaching moral and psychological consequences.

But today this idea is in retreat. There are two main reasons for this. In the Roman Catholic Church it has been recognised that the hierarchy has sometimes used guilt as a tool control. In 1968 the Medellin Conference of Catholic Bishops in Columbia spoke of God’s preferential option for the poor. This was an important moment in the life of the Church, a statement of the social and implications of faith which would transform theology and pastoral practice for decades. It was motivated by a concern for justice and a refusal to accept the inevitability of poverty. It introduced a new language for sin, the notion that sin was in some sense, structural and was most obviously manifest in various forms of social and economic oppression.

An important consequence of this was to suggest that the weight of responsibility for sin should be lifted from individuals and focused more on the vested interests of those in power. Rather than pointing at personal sins it became normal to lament before God our communal share in, for example, damage to the environment or the stockpiling of nuclear weapons. The theology of liberation also gave more weight to lay voices, to

critical voices both within and without the Church. This shift of emphasis was then followed by the gradual discovery that there were those in positions of pastoral responsibility who had abused trust in various ways, either financially or sexually. So those who had preached so passionately against divorce and abortion were sometimes themselves found to be steeped in scandalous behaviours, and even worse, when discovered, they were often protected by the hierarchies. No wonder congregations became cynical. This recognition has led to the practice of individual confession almost dying out in the Roman Catholic Church in parts of Europe and North America.

The second reason why the language of sin has become problematic is the spread of psychological interest and awareness. Until the beginning of the 1960s if you were the kind of person who needed, and could afford, psychotherapy you would most likely have gone for help to a psychoanalyst, to someone trained in the theory and practice initiated by Sigmund Freud and followed in various ways by his disciples. I grew up in North London and was well aware of a therapeutic industry centred on Hampstead and to a lesser degree Kensington and Bayswater which is where you could go for Freudian or Jungian or Kleinian analysis. This often took many years and involved a minute examination of consciousness in order to reveal the unconscious drives and motivations which were giving rise to unhappiness.

Freud indeed believed that the human plight is tragic. Our misery is rooted in biology, in our captivity to our non-rational instincts. Human beings, he believed operated on three levels; (an echo of Plato's understanding of the three-part structure of the soul). In the centre of Freud's map of the self was the ego, the 'I' with its story, its ambitions and hopes. The aspirations of the *ego* are questioned, supervised, limited, by the *superego*, the voice of the parent and through the parent, society insisting on a repression of our desires in the interest of civility. And then, underneath all this, lurks the unreflective and unconscious *id*, dominated by animal needs and the instinct for pleasure, an instinct which is often inordinate and frequently at others' expense. The aim of Freudian analysis was relatively modest. To make conscious the buried repressed conflicts of the self and to enable the person to function, to love and to work, in other words to be a useful member of society. This requires the ego to hold the boundaries between the repressive superego and the irresponsible id. But this requirement was never easy and could never be completely fulfilled. The conflict between the conscious self and its biological urges is ultimate and perhaps irresolvable. The ego is always in danger of being crushed by the superego or overwhelmed by the id.

Freud was not a religious believer; he thought religion was illusion that human beings had to learn to do without. But his basic belief about what is wrong with us are consistent with the Western trajectory of thought which, since Augustine, singled out pride as the fundamental obstacle to human wholeness. Freud thought psychological disturbance could often be traced to pride which he saw as excessive self-love, a life in which the ego fails to hold the balance between what we might call the higher and lower self.

The 1960s saw the beginning of American counter-culture and part of that was what came to be called the human potential movement. This was a rebellion against mainstream religion and morality in America and is associated with names such as Abraham Maslow and perhaps, most significantly, Carl Rogers.

Carl Rogers was psychotherapist whose influence has been enormous both in the United States and in Europe. His major contribution was his critique of Sigmund Freud.

Rogers disagreed fundamentally with Freud. Doing therapy with many disturbed individuals, including criminals, he came to the view that what was wrong with them was not pride, but its opposite, self-contempt. The proud person is self-centred, assertive, thinks too much of themselves. But many of those who came to him for therapy seemed to think too little of themselves, to believe that they were flawed, rubbish, hopeless. This was not only true of those who presented with depressive symptoms, but of those who appeared aggressive and self-confident, who blamed their problems on others or in circumstances. Rogers saw this apparent confidence as a defensive move. Underneath they hated and rejected themselves. Rogers came to the view that those who needed therapy first had to have an experience of what he called unconditional positive regard. The therapist was not there to criticise, train or punish but to hold the individual in a place of safety and affirmation. Rogers compared this concern for the well-being of the damaged individual as Christian love or *agape*, and believed that in the end unconditional acceptance would bring the wounded individual to accept him or herself.

The therapeutic world continues to revisit this intellectual battleground between Freud's view and that of Rogers, drawing in a range of cultural commentators and social scientists. The conflict can be simply illustrated by way of a conversation – and I am quoting here from a recent book by Terry D. Cooper, *Sin, Pride and Self-Acceptance*. Here he imagines two people called Sam and Betty, both Americans, having a conversation:

‘I find it very hard to tolerate Jack’ said Sam, ‘He’s extremely pompous, full of himself and conceited. Who does he think he is? He really thinks he’s better than everyone else’.

‘Yes,’ says Betty, ‘But you know that’s all a big mask to cover his real problem - Jack is like everyone else – his basic problem is low self-esteem which he hides very well.

Sam quickly retorted, ‘I can’t believe you think everyone’s problem is low self-esteem! Particularly in today’s world. I think the exact opposite is true. People think too highly of themselves. They place themselves at the centre of everything.....Pride is our number one enemy, the first and greatest sin....’

‘Yes’ said Betty, ‘But that was before psychotherapists really started understanding that pride is a cover up for feelings of inadequacy.....pride is never the bottom line issue. It is not the primary problem. Instead it’s a symptom’.

‘I’m sorry’ said Sam, ‘but I find that view really naïve’
‘And I find your view’ said Betty, ‘cynical’.

This conversation neatly lays out the problem. Betty’s view, characterised by Sam as naïve – that what is wrong with us is lack of self-love - is often taken those in today’s therapeutic professions. The opposing view - seen by Betty as cynical - that what is wrong with us is excessive self-love, even pride, is perhaps more often taken by police and judges and by some significant cultural critics.

During the 1960s the message of Carl Rogers was taken up with enthusiasm. It resonated with a theology that had already begun to emerge in American Protestantism through the writing of Paul Tillich. There is a famous sermon of Tillich published in his 1948 collection of sermons, *The Shaking of the Foundations* which was based on St Paul’s letter to the Romans. He appeals to the doctrine of justification by faith and urges his readers and hearers to attend to the ringing invitation of divine grace: ‘simply accept the fact that you are accepted’. He laid the groundwork for what I have already tried to describe, the downplaying of the sombre language of sin, judgement and spiritual conflict and a new spiritual theology of what we might call learning to trust and find fulfilment in the light of God’s unconditional positive regard. The human problem was defined as lack of self-love, a wounding sense of deficiency from which the love of God rescued us. The challenge was to find ‘the courage to be’ – to quote the title of another of Tillich’s books. Personal salvation morphed into personal fulfilment. The real issue was not sin, but lack of self-love.

This has proved incredibly attractive to late 20th century and early 21st century believers. It brings into Christian spirituality a new sense of innocence. The inner child is not naughty but hurt. We suffer not from original sin but from original pain and the shame that comes from that. Re-connect with our inner self and we will find a fountain of wealth and healing. If this sounds familiar, it is. We have all of us imbibed the theology and spirituality of the human potential movement and been nourished by its optimism.

Contrast that optimism with classical Western pessimism From Augustine’s point of view the instinct to excessive-love is born in us and there is no possibility of spiritual life or growth until this is acknowledged and repented of.

Augustine writes in *The Confessions* (after reflecting on his own experience as an infant): ‘It can hardly be right for a child even at (that) age to cry for everything, including things which would harm him; to work himself into a tantrum against people older than himself, and not required to obey him; and to try his best to strike and hurt others who know better than he does’. Augustine accepts that baby tantrums are quickly grown out of and are usually well-tolerated by understanding parents, but

he still concludes that ‘if babies are innocent, it is not for the lack of will to do harm, but for lack of strength...’ noting that ‘the same faults are intolerable in older persons’.

So here is Augustine finding the seeds of excessive self-love, excessive self-regard, pride, in the natural and infantile response to hunger and discomfort. Augustine sees in the baby’s natural behaviour an inborn demand which derives ultimately from Adam’s rebellion against God in the garden. Proudful rebellion comes first and the other sins, vainglory, anger, envy etc follow it. Because we refuse to find our true well-being in God we turn to material things for comfort, and treat them as substitutes for God. The sins of excess; gluttony and lust and avarice are a form of idolatry; they fill the gap created by our pride-driven rejection of God and God’s provision for us. But these sins of excess are not ultimate; the first and greatest sin is that proudful rebellion, that refusal to serve, to acknowledge the Godness of God.

Human pride, therefore, in the traditional view of the Western Church is the sin which stands in the way of our relationship with God. True prayer can only begin in cry of despair, an intolerable thirst for a communion which we have lost, and the path of spirituality must be the path of ever-growing penance. God is at war with the proud self which has fortified itself against him.

Now, as I have suggested, I partly agree with those who think that this approach to spirituality has become unreal. Seeing God as the judge of my every thought and action confessing every wayward impulse, always watchful in case I commit the spiritual equivalent of a minor traffic offence; this does not quite seem to me to speak of the fullness of life which Christ came to bring. It leads to a forensic theology, a sense that we are always in court, pleading our case before God, or in the dock with Christ pleading our case for us, as though God did not know or understand who we are and what we are capable of.

But neither do I think that the optimistic expansive approach which sees our fundamental problem as lack of self-esteem does real justice to human experience. Whatever our spiritual practice may be our actual behaviour continues to wound ourselves and others.

So while I think the concentration on pride as the source of sin has done us harm I think spirituality based on the more optimistic kind of psychology is inadequate.

There are four reasons why I have come to think this. The first is that it fails to recognise the reality of evil. I remember a friend who was chaplain to a prison hospital who spoke of some of the men she worked with and how she experienced them. She spoke of how they were often capable of charm, intelligence, even empathy, but then could suddenly flip into violent and abusive language as though a switch had been flicked in the brain. We have all perhaps had experience of coming across a wall in certain individuals, a point at which they confront us with a kind of total resistance to reason and compassion. It is as though they are totally absorbed in

their own project, lost in a fearful marriage of ego and id which knows no social boundaries and has no conscience or restraint. Whatever the humanistic psychologists may say sociopathy and psychopathy are experienced conditions which cannot be cured but only contained. It may be a sickness, but then, in the Christian spiritual tradition, sin *is* a kind of sickness and it may be that some of it is at least in this life, incurable.

Second, humanistic psychology often undermines itself. Take its impact on the upbringing of children. On the plus side parents in the United States and Europe are likely to see their children as individuals rather than as extensions of themselves. They know that it is important to give their children confidence and want their children to have high self-esteem, and to fulfil their potential. Yet being encouraged to high self-esteem does not seem to protect all children from depression, lack of confidence, and even the tendency to self-harm. I spoke to a college chaplain in Oxford about students who became over anxious before exams and who confessed the thing she most wanted to say to many of them was, 'Get a grip'. But, she said, you can't. Parents and the students themselves could only accept the medicalization of their problem: anxiety, depression, panic attacks etc. These symptoms can be treated. Fear can't because the cure for fear is not pills but courage. So at times I think humanistic psychology undermines the quest for virtue.

Third, I notice that Christian parents who have absorbed the humanistic language of individual self-fulfilment are not very good at passing on the Christian faith to their children. They seem to think that making their children go to church is a potential abuse of their human rights, and that they should be free to choose their own way without considering their parents' views. Conservative-minded Christians are often better at passing on the faith, even if some of their children subsequently rebel against its constraints.

And lastly, I notice that those who have come to some degree of spiritual maturity often become more aware of their personal sinfulness as they get older; not in an over-indulgent or fascinated way, but simply as a fact; not a terribly important fact, because that would be to be melodramatic, but a fact to be acknowledged none the less. T. S. Eliot describes this in his Four Quartets where he speaks of: 'the rending pain of re-enactment, of all that you have done, and been, the shame of motives late revealed, and the awareness of things ill done and done to others's harm, which once you took for exercise of virtue.'

I can echo this in my own experience. I used to agonise about my sins in a rather self-absorbed way as a teenager and then, like many of us I went 'off' sin, preferring a humanistic Christianity which emphasised self-acceptance and personal growth. Then from time in prayer I would be quite forcibly struck by a sense of my own obstinacy, hard-heartedness of spiritual blindness. This was not accompanied by emotion or by fear or shame. It was more like a sheer objective fact, a diagnosis delivered out of the blue which was, when I thought about it, entirely self-evident. I recognised this person. I recognised these issues. Yet here I was in the presence of love, in the

presence of God's forgiving grace, and in one sense my predisposition to sin and my actual sinful behaviour did not matter at all. I was, I am accepted. In another sense seeing a truth about myself was a gift. It enabled genuine repentance, the joy of saying, 'Yes, this is true'. It is worse than I feared and yet it was fear that was preventing me from seeing the truth, and now I see it, I am free.

And it was because of this that it finally struck me that the problem with the emphasis on pride as the first sin and the origin of sin was that it encourages that constant self-absorption, that narcissistic circling of the issues of the self which prevents us from genuine spiritual freedom. Seeing pride as the core of the problem actually makes us egocentric, whether in overbearing attempts to exalt ourselves or self-destructive attempts to diminish ourselves. It turns out that low self-esteem and excessive self-love are not opposites so much as mirror images of each other.

In the light of that is there anything we can draw from the Christian spiritual tradition which might encourage us to pray in a more balanced and healthy way?

I go back before Augustine to the second century theologian Irenaeus. Unlike Augustine, Irenaeus believed in the innocence of Adam and Eve. They were children, curious but ignorant, easily led astray, and the Fall in the Garden of Eden was not so much a rebellion, as the consequence of their immaturity. Their mistake was not a catastrophe so much as an anticipated set back. God's plan to become incarnate in Christ was always an inclusive project; to bring his human creatures to fulfilment in his Son. The incarnation was the whole point of creation; not a hastily dreamed up plan B to save humanity from hell. So sin matters and has to be overcome, but it is not centre-stage

Having said that sin is real and must be dealt with. It is as real as sickness and should be dealt with in the way we deal with harmful bacteria. Its root is in our vulnerability. Not the prideful rebellion that Augustine projected onto the crying baby, but the baby's own need, immaturity and susceptibility.

The Eastern spiritual tradition developed the idea that sin arose from vulnerability. There are two over-riding human flaws. The first is gluttony, in the sense of greed, the other is pride, but this is not quite pride in the Western Augustinian sense.

In the East greed is the attitude which seeks to find its fulfilment material things, in food, in money, in possessions, in the bodies of others. The greedy self seeks to absorb the other into itself, annexes other people and things and even attempts to co-opt God for its own purposes. It is not so much a refusal of God as an attempt to swallow God whole. I suspect that some contemporary spirituality is an expression of this attempt, spiritual gluttony, which wants the experience of God without the pain of change. When it fails, as it always does ultimately, it is followed by anger which often arises as the aggressive refusal to accept the frustration of greed. Anger here comes as fury at lost entitlement, rage against irritating others, resentment against real or imagined infringements of the self's sense of its own worth. Again, in an Eastern

perspective anger reflects what we might call a narcissistic attempt to subdue the other to serve the self. The frustration of this can then lead to that pair of sins, excess melancholy (traditionally called *accidie*) and sloth – the two are often conflated, though they are rather different from one another. But they have this in common, both represent withdrawals of energy into the self itself, a refusal with God or with anyone else. Pride comes at the end of this catalogue of disasters, the ultimate state of self-sufficiency, of needing no one, not even God. Pride from the Eastern viewpoint is more subtle and less easily recognised than it is in the Western tradition and it comes as a sign of the final disintegration of a self which has already been fractured by greed and exploded by anger and isolated by sloth.

Thinking about sin from this more Eastern perspective might enable us to make sense of it in four ways which balance the therapeutic insights of the human potential movement with the call from the tradition to recognise and resist our own sinful impulses.

The first is that it enables us to start from the wounded child. We are Adam and Eve in the garden, not in proud revolt against God but in curiosity, wonder, and vulnerability. The snake flickers in the corner of our eyes and we will always be attracted. And God has pity on this weakness in us. He clothes us, hiding our shame and protecting us from the elements. And from the Garden of Eden onwards it is not uncommon for the first word in any encounter with God or an angel of God is a word of affirmation. 'Fear not'. This seems to me to be true to scripture. God is essentially merciful; grace is his very nature. He knows whereof we are made.

Second, it avoids the tendency to become fixated on our vulnerability and build it up into an identity with which to condemn and persecute others. There is a lot of that around today, you know, my suffering is worse than yours and therefore I am entitled to special treatment. Instead an acknowledgment of our vulnerability is meant to spur us to develop through cycles of increasing self-knowledge, exposure of deeper vulnerabilities, conflict, forgiveness, repentance and the slow unfolding of our true potential. Julian of Norwich's insistence that God treats us from first to last with 'courtesy' resonates here. Spirituality is about the recovery of trust in God.

God does not want us to be fear-filled slaves; but nor does he want us to be imprisoned in self-regard. We are in fact to be clothed in Christ, to become as Christ through our baptism and the living out of the grace and promises of baptism. God loves us, always, just as we are, but there is also room for change, growth, transformation.

Third, it does not give sin too much power or make rebellion an expression of heroic independence. Sin is not a drama, it is, like evil, in the words of the philosopher Hannah Arendt, essentially banal. It is always a short cut, a cheap solution.

And finally it offers practical and realistic techniques of discernment and resistance for training the self in faithful living; the constant recollection of God's mercy in

prayers such as the Jesus prayer and the practice of the virtues. We are not without these resources in our Anglican tradition. I think of Hooker and his celebration of redeemed reason and Jeremy Taylor's Holy Living and Holy Dying. But that would be subject for another address.

I think we urgently need to recover a spiritual path which takes sin seriously while not being obsessed or depressed by it. The spiritual health of our churches and communities may depend on our willingness and readiness to do this.