

SIN – THE SHATTERING OF COMMUNITY

God's plan to become one community with humankind was not motivated by any need to deal with our sinfulness. Had humanity not sinned I believe that Christ would still have become a human being and the Spirit would still have been poured out into our hearts. But humanity did sin and the difference it made was enormous.

Sin is essentially a refusal to love God and neighbour as much as one should. Its effects are the exact opposite to those birthed by love. If love unites and by its uniting transforms all it unites, then sin divides and by dividing destroys all it divides.

The first division that sin brings about is between humanity and God. The result is that what should have been a trust-filled relationship basking in the power of God's love becomes one filled with fear at the power of God to punish. Moreover our minds are clouded so that it becomes difficult to see God's presence in the world and atheism becomes possible.

Moreover, cut off from God we are incapable of living a life of love for neighbour. Mistrust of each other becomes the rule. Any meaningful form of community breaks down and people can no longer see any point in being together except for mutual convenience.

The divisiveness springs up even inside us. The lack of a love that would press all our appetites and desires into love's service results in their becoming a seething mass of competing demands, each one seeking its own satisfaction.

But it is in what sin does to our relationship with our environment, that is to say the world we create around us, from shops to social structures, that we can see the power of sin. A world in which sin reigned supreme would be one in which all the structures created by us, all that we do to nature, would be a living testimony to selfishness. It would be a loveless world, one in which fear, hate and war would exist without any hope of anything better, since only love can give such hope. The awesome power of sin becomes visible because the effects of our sinfulness live on even when we repent of them. They remain there embedded in the structures that mould people's minds to see what is really evil as being something good or at least permissible. The apartheid state was a classic example of this.

The result of the rampant destructiveness of sin is suffering. Jesus made it clear that not all suffering is the result of a particular person's sinfulness. Nevertheless, suffering remains a potent symbol of the wreckage caused by sin. For suffering is more than pain: it is the agony of experiencing pain in a loveless and meaningless world.

In a world totally dominated by sin, death would be sin's ultimate victory: a hopeless end to a meaningless life. In a world totally dominated by love death may well remain a process of biological dissolution. But the entire process would be experienced as the final and greatest gift of love to us: our risen life.

Not surprisingly, the Scriptures and Christian tradition speak frequently of God punishing sin. The traditional way of conceiving this was to picture God as thinking up a particular punishment for a particular sin. However theologians have pointed out that sin punishes itself. For we were made for love and can therefore only be happy by loving. A refusal to love brings its own pain and suffering and this will happen without God having to lift a finger. The only finger God will lift is the one that invites the sinner to repentance. For thanks to Christ, sin does not reign supreme. On the contrary, its power has been conquered by Christ's love, the love that is Holy Spirit who dwells within us.