

A priest was once taking a retreat at a convent and at the end, when he was walking out to his car accompanied by the Reverend Mother he apologised. 'That was not a good retreat. I'm sorry. The addresses were poor.' 'Don't worry, Father,' said the Reverend Mother, 'nuns are like cockroaches; they can get nourishment out of cardboard if necessary'. Well, I hope you are like nuns.

'Don't walk on the grass'. 'Don't touch.' 'No entry'. How many of us have thought, 'Blow that!' and proceeded to do precisely what is forbidden. Trivial examples of the sin but it is fundamentally the same as that which led to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise. Sin! A rough definition being; 'Missing the mark'; 'Doing that which prevents us from being what God created us to be, truly human, and separates us from him'. Why is it that we always want to do what is forbidden? And so Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge which God had forbidden them to eat. It is not just the disobedience but the pride which lies behind it---'I know better than God what is good for me'.

Interestingly, both the Old Testament and Gospel readings suggest that we are not always totally to blame----there is a force outside ourselves which has power over us. 'The serpent beguiled me and I did eat'----we are slaves of the strong man.

The strong man, the devil, Satan, the powers of evil, has us in captivity. We all know that. 'I do not do the good that I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do'. The strong man lures us into sin by persuading us that it is not really a sin. 'Everybody does it'; 'I have a right to be happy'; 'He/she did it first.' Secretly, though, we know that we are doing wrong.

The 'unforgivable sin' is deliberately to call evil, good and good, evil. Jesus was the victim of this time and time again when the Pharisees

refused to believe that anyone not keeping the Law, particularly about the Sabbath, as they thought it should be kept, could be of God. The man born blind said to the Pharisees, 'To open the eyes of a man born blind—it is unheard of. If that man had not come from God he could have done nothing.' "You have been born in sin and would you teach us?" '

Even that, though, is forgivable, if the persons eventually recognise that their judgment has been faulty; that they have put themselves in the place of God, and repent.

But the wages of sin, (unrepented sin) is death. 'Who will deliver me from this body of death?' Jesus. He conquered death; though we will all die some day, we do so knowing that there is a resurrection.

Jesus, as usual, turns everything up-side-down. Yes, it *is* he who has the power to bind the strong man and he shows his power in his healing miracles but in the end it is *he* who is bound and led to the cross and killed. There is an allusion here to the offering of Isaac by his father Abraham. In a Targum Isaac says to his father, " 'Bind me well that I may not struggle at the anguish of my soul, and that a blemish may not be found in your offering.'" The binding Isaac asks for expresses his own inner offering; he does not want to risk wounding himself, because in that case he would no longer be a victim that could be offered.' Jesus' death is the reality of which Isaac's binding is the type.

Loving self-sacrifice, though, has a power that is stronger than death and in the case of Jesus, who was sinless, the power is infinite. The bound man who took upon himself the sin of the whole world, past present and future, dealt it a mortal blow when he voluntarily went to his death. He went down into hell but hell couldn't keep him. The only thing which destroys evil is self-sacrificial love.

'When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men'. What are these gifts?

It is true that SIN in its existential being, as against individual sins, has been dealt a mortal blow, but it is still active and has us in its power so we continue to commit 'sins'. There are remedies for sins, though and I would like to mention three.

On the cross Jesus appears as the Paschal lamb, pure and unblemished, who takes away the sin of the world. No bone of his was broken but his side was pierced by a lance and out came water and blood. The Fathers saw in the issue of water and blood from the side of Jesus both the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist and the beginnings of the Church.

To quote Pope Benedict in his second book on Jesus of Nazareth: 'The opened side of the Lord asleep on the cross points to the creation of Eve from the side of Adam, and so in the outpouring of the sacraments the Fathers also recognised the birth of the Church: the creation of the new woman from the side of the new Adam.' We are a new creation and as such are made pure and blameless because we are in Christ. He is the head; we are the body and therefore have a share in all Christ's inheritance.

By the Church's baptism in the name of the Holy Trinity 'we were buried with him into his death so that the sinful body may be destroyed and we might no longer be enslaved to sin'. The strong man has been bound. Jesus has ascended into heaven as the head of his body, the Church, and God, 'who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence'. At our baptism, what the author of 'The Cloud of Unknowing' called a lump---'Think of sin as a lump and that lump is you'---is destroyed

and so we already have eternal life because we are already risen with Jesus.

Then, the Eucharist; attending Mass with the right disposition and receiving Holy Communion wipes away all venial sins.

Finally there is the sacrament of reconciliation, or penance. What a gift this is. Even the most hardened sinner can be cleansed from all sins by this sacrament.

That is not the end of the story though. We can't just sit back and wait for heaven. We have our part to play. We too have to bind the strong man by exactly the same means as Jesus. We have to destroy sin and evil, both in ourselves and in the world, by self-sacrificial love, which means carrying our own particular cross daily, absorbing all the evil that is thrown at us and not retaliating in kind. Not easy, but we have the promise that Jesus is with us through the action of the Holy Spirit to the end of time.

And what is in store for us? Nothing less than glory. We sometimes think of life after death as being somewhat ethereal but Paul says we are being prepared for an eternal WEIGHT of glory, beyond all comparison. It is solid, concrete, lasting and supremely satisfying. What gifts!

Thanks be to God for the means of grace and the hope of glory. Amen.