

SALVATION – FROM WHAT DOES JESUS SAVE US?

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IN a previous article (Autumn 1992), I explored the meaning of the Paschal Mystery in terms of the choices made by Jesus and the Father. The present article continues to ponder this key Christian event. We acknowledge the Paschal Mystery as 'a saving event' and speak of the Cross as 'the means of our Redemption', but what do these words really mean? In grappling with this question I have again found the writing of Sebastian Moore particularly helpful as he draws on the insights of psychology to provide contemporary models of sin and salvation.

A starting point

In my pre-Vatican II primary-school days I was given a very clear model for understanding Redemption.

23. How did God the Son redeem us?

God the Son redeemed us by His sufferings and death on the cross.

24. Why did we need to be redeemed?

We needed to be redeemed because our first parents, Adam and Eve, who had been created heirs to the kingdom of heaven, had sinned against God and by their sin had closed heaven against all mankind.

As the above catechism answers show, the starting point in traditional soteriology is sin. But this makes as much sense as psychologists developing an understanding of human behaviour from their analysis of psychotic patients. Psychotics are not the norm. Sin is not the essence of humanity, if it were, could Jesus have taken on our full humanity? Sin, while being part of human experience, is not intrinsic to it. It is sin, not divinity, that is alien. Only because of this could Christianity be based on a claim that 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us' (Jn 1:14).

Moore's anthropology of desire

Sebastian Moore's anthropology presents humanity as drawn towards or desirous of God. In this, Moore breaks sharply with individualist psychologies such as that of Fritz Perls, where wholeness is presented as independence. For Moore, wholeness is found in relationship, which is experienced as an inner drive to reach beyond oneself in curiosity, wonder, desire. But as well as an urge beyond oneself towards relationship, there is also a sense of unique individuality. Within each of us there is a self-consciousness that is able to participate in reality in a differentiated manner. While most of the time we enter into experiences and into relationships without a great deal of self-consciousness, we do have the capacity to step back from these engagements and reflect on our experience. During such times of reflection I know myself to be a participant in a life process that is bigger than myself. To know myself as part of, yet not the whole of, reality is to acknowledge my human mortality; it is to face the truth of my creatureliness that I am a participant in life but not the author of life.

In the second chapter of Genesis the Yahwist theologian presents this human experience in the beautiful creation narrative where Adam is formed from the substance of the earth (adamah) but becomes a living being only when imbued with the breath of God. There is a tension within this earth-formed, Spirit-gifted creature, that is unique within created reality. Only the human creature is open to a conscious relationship with the creator. Indeed, within the Yahwist account, the only thing named as 'not good' is for the man to be alone, to be out of relationship. The goodness of being in relationship is celebrated with the creation of woman: 'Here at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my

flesh' (Gen 2:23). Because this is a story, the author conveys a sense that there was some period of time when human beings experienced harmony, without sin or shame marring their relationship with each other and God.

What the Yahwist describes, using the language of myth and the form of narrative, Moore expresses in the language of psychology. Both are exploring the tension experienced by a desire to be in relationship with God and that pull within which thwarts this desire and alienates us from our true self, from others, from God, from life itself. In our tradition we call this negative pull 'sin'. With the awareness that this 'sin' transcends the sum of individual sins, we speak of Original Sin. Prior to modern biblical scholarship, the Genesis story was read in a literal, historical way as an explanation for the cause of the condition called Original Sin. According to the Catechism which many of us grew up with, Original Sin was understood as an individual act done by an 'original' human being then passed on as some inherent deficiency to all other members of the species.

Moore and Original Sin

In different ways, and using a variety of words and images, Moore explores this concept of Original Sin. His fullest analysis is found in *Let This Mind Be In You*. He distinguishes the doctrine of Original Sin from its culturally conditioned theological explanations. This distinction is helpful, and enables Moore to draw on current psychological knowledge to present a theological approach that may speak to contemporary readers. Moore situates the experience of Original Sin in the original experience of self-consciousness. Drawing on the work of Freud, Mahler, Miller and, to a lesser degree, Erikson, he describes the process of developing a differentiated self-awareness in the first twelve to eighteen months of human life. From the time when the symbiotic bond between mother and child is broken, self-doubt contends with self-esteem.

All human beings experience this crisis and, even in the most favourable circumstances, the fact of developing a separated self-consciousness gives rise to a residual mistrust. Instead of self-trust, openness to life, awareness of personal goodness and desirability, there is mistrust, self dis-esteem, fear and guilt. At whatever time in history the evolutionary



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miracle occurred that changed instinct to human consciousness, this dynamic was present. This first psycho-social crisis is the birthplace of the tension or ambivalence within our experience, whereby we desire God yet cannot trust our own essential desirability. So instead of seeing myself as innately good, I develop a self-image by seeing myself through the eyes of others and see goodness as something other-given, something therefore to be worked for, earned, deserved. This situation describes the human story thwarted by the power of sin both at a personal and social level. Even, and perhaps especially, religion creates attitudes where humans are categorised as holy - sinful, righteous - unclean. Religious rituals then become an attempt to make oneself desirable, to placate an angry God whom one has failed, or to make oneself worthy before God.

Into this human history, tragically gone awry, came Jesus. By word and loving presence he tried to break through the barriers of doubt and mistrust that prevent our believing that we are truly loved by God. What was it that enabled this one man, Jesus, to be free from the crippling self-doubt of Original Sin?

Jesus - free from Original Sin

Many people see the unique relationship between Jesus and the Father as a result of his sinlessness. Because Jesus was free from the power of sin he was able to be totally open to God.

But I ask the question in reverse: What if Jesus' intimacy with God was the *cause* rather than the *result* of his sinlessness? What if knowledge of the Father, uniquely his as the pre-existent Son, is what made the difference in Jesus' life?

What we have as a limited consciousness or a 'sense' of God, in Jesus was a full knowledge. In us, this sense of God is weakened by a doubt or a wondering if God is just a dream of our own

making; and when this mistrust takes over we draw away from and even deny our desire for God.

In Jesus there can be no mistrust. He knows as he is known. He knows the Father as Lover and himself as the Beloved. This is what John describes in his prologue – the Word is turned in loving union to God; the Son is in the bosom of the Father. This relationship gives him a unique knowledge of God. When Word becomes flesh, this knowledge is not lost; it becomes human knowledge. We know from the experience of mystics that there is a depth of knowledge and intimacy with God that is overwhelming while it is still a fully human experience. From this intimate knowledge of the Father, Jesus can speak with authority. His humanity is filled with a conscious awareness that enables him to translate his experience into words, images and parables that others can relate to. His companions can also be caught up in his Abba experience. Daily life in Palestine becomes transparent to a loving, inviting Father. The parables give us glimpses of Jesus' ability to see the Kingdom in life around him. Seeds, dough, sheep, fishnets, planting, reaping – when seen through the eyes of Jesus point to the Kingdom of his Father.

Jesus' effective sinlessness

Moore calls this experience of Jesus and its impact on the disciples a 'Galilean Springtime'. Jesus lives a full humanity open to the experience of loving and being loved by God. This is not a *super-human* life, but is, for the first time, a *truly human* life which is not lessened by the fear and self doubt of sin. Jesus' experience was contagious. The disciples were those whose hearts were stirred by his words and presence. He awakened in them a new sense of God and a new sense of themselves as loved by God. But this was conditional on having Jesus' presence with them, for Jesus was the mediator of this 'God-experience'. Right to the end of his ministry they could not directly know the Father whom Jesus was revealing. Philip requests, 'Lord, show us the Father and we shall be satisfied'. They still have not got the message: 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father' (Jn 14:9). Jesus is the compassionate presence of God, but to believe this required a degree of trust the disciples did not have. The self-doubt described above as Original Sin, remained

within their hearts. Could God really be so loving, so generous, so forgiving? Jesus' living presence among them enabled hope to displace this doubt. But with his death hope died.

Jesus could have avoided Golgotha. It is possible that he could have continued to teach, to heal, to gather disciples in Galilee without coming into open conflict with the religious and civil authorities. But such conflict was inevitable given his unique relationship with the Father and the knowledge born of that relationship. He knew the depth of God's love and God's desire to communicate this love to all people. He also knew from his own experience the capacity of the human heart to be open to such love. The choice he made to be true to his experience of the Father led to his conflict with Judaism.

There is a particularly subtle yet powerful form of evil that all religions can fall prey to. Religion can domesticate God – reduce God to images that we can manage or that fall within our comprehension. This not only dulls the sensitivity to an utterly mysterious Love but also dulls the desire for such a Lover and allows the absence of love (i.e. sin) to be tolerable – we do not miss what we do not know or believe possible! Jesus broke down the religious stereotype of God. His Father was one who sought out the lost, welcomed sinners, and one whose activity was not restricted by labels such as Jew or Gentile, unclean or righteous. Jesus came to cast fire on the earth (Lk 12:49), to enable a purified vision of God, free of any false religious accretions. In the light of his refining fire, evil cast its darkest shadow. Evil worked through the fear and self-righteousness of religious people in Jesus' time, as it can do in any age.

Jesus' loving relationship with the Father fashioned his life. Questions about meaning and self-worth, which arise from the self-doubt of original Sin, had no power in Jesus' life. The meaning of his life lay with the Father. His food was to the the will of the Father. In such a life death was of no consequence. Concern about death could not diminish his love of life or turn his focus from the Father to self preservation. His confrontation with religious and political leaders brought about his death. But the inner dynamic was the primal conflict between a God of love revealed in Jesus, and Evil that denies such love and turns instead to other sources of security.

The scene at the cross shows this contrast most starkly. There are the crucifiers – those trapped within the legalistic interpretation of Israel's heritage. There is the crucified - vulnerable, stripped of everything but trust in the Father. Luke records the judgment of a Centurion on this execution – 'Certainly this man was innocent' (Lk 23:47). This death was obscene.

Christologies that present Jesus as an example for human moral behaviour stop here. In the life and death of this man we have a model or example of human love and self-sacrifice. But this was not simply a human drama, for Jesus was Immanuel, God-with-us. In the life and death of Jesus we have a God of Love showing us the fullness of love and Love's desire for us – 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life' (Jn 3:16). This is what was rejected on Calvary. When Love was most explicitly revealed in Jesus, a sinful humanity cried out 'Away with him' (Jn 19:15). Christologies that emphasise only the humanity of Jesus, as an example to be followed, leave humanity's rejection of God's loving invitation ringing through the centuries as a reverberating – No !!!

The climax of calvary—guilty

The cross reveals human sinfulness in its starkest reality. Divine Love was revealed as clearly as is humanly possible in Jesus. The world looked, touched, tasted and finally said 'No. This leaves no excuses. There can be no saying, 'If only we'd realised... It was a mistake... a tragic error'. This is certainly what we are inclined to do. In guilt we do try to find an excuse, or project our wrong onto another. No human excuse is possible for Golgotha. There is no-where to hide behind a cross. Thus any hope that we could see ourselves as desirable, any faint belief in our value, is destroyed by the unmitigated verdict on our action at Calvary – Guilty!

While the religious leaders of the time may have experienced some sense of guilt with the blood of an innocent on their hands, the disciples' experience went far deeper. Jesus had awakened in them a desire similar to his own. 'Lord show us the Father and we shall be satisfied'. For all its ignorance, the request is still valid,, the yearning for the God whom Jesus revealed. This is the deepest human desire that

is usually submerged beneath barriers of self-doubt, of a sense of failure and guilt - what was described above as original Sin. For a time, these first followers had this barrier lifted and their desire to be God-tending freed. With the death of Jesus, these hopes and desires were destroyed and in this destruction lay their deepest experience of original sin. For in their companionship with Jesus, they had glimpsed desire liberated; they had known a fullness, an ecstasy of human life, that was now extinguished. The Gospels capture some of their experience of sin's despair. Luke describes a pair walking away from Jerusalem and speaking to a stranger of their 'had-hopes' (Lk 23:13-35). John described their alienation from Jesus and each other, 'The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, every one to their home, and will leave me alone' (Jn 16:32). The communion they had shared is now destroyed. They give up hope. The barriers close down again. The actions of the crucifiers in executing Jesus externalise the action of Original Sin within their hearts. Desire is not true and must be stifled. The disciples are left desolate, carrying the full impact of failure and guilt.

Resurrection Verdict - not guilty

Only the wronged Lover can excuse the rejection of love. This is the Resurrection. The human-forsaken one returns still breathing love. It is the same Jesus, carrying in his Risen Body the signs of our rejection. What is the human experience of and response to this return? Surprisingly the Gospels record no confessions of guilt or shame or self-castigation. Jesus' return means love is unconditionally being given again. Forgiveness is a past event. God has seen through the fear and doubt which sin causes and which produced the crucifixion of Love. God sees in Jesus' loving surrender on the cross a humanity separated from the power of sin, a human being as originally intended, bearing the image of God and declared 'good' (Gen 1:31).

The Sinless One not only reveals God's desire for humanity, but humanity's desire for God when this is freed from the corrupting power of sin. on Calvary Jesus draws all to himself in his moment of being lifted up. It is an exaltation of Jesus, and in him an exaltation of humanity's essential goodness. This does not deny sin, but clearly separates it from the intrinsic, God-

imaging, desirability of human beings. As already stated, sin casts doubt on this essential goodness and exerts a power in life that distorts our self-image and thwarts our desire for God. The Paschal event breaks the power which sin exerts to keep humanity trapped in guilt. The Resurrection proclaims God's verdict – Not guilty.

The disciples experience themselves as once again in relationship with Jesus and with His Abba. In time they will know with explosive force that they too are children of the Father. This Divine Filiation is the gift of the Spirit and is an essential part of the dynamic of salvation – not an afterthought. When Jesus returns to the Father, the disciples discover that the love which he mediated to them, they now participate in immediately. The Spirit – the loving intimacy between Jesus and the Father – now burns within their own hearts. They know themselves as beloved children. For the first time they see their true humanity as God intended and it is lovely!

This Trinitarian soteriology is truly liberating. The Spirit given by Jesus as his first Easter gift is a Spirit of divine intimacy now accessible to people of all ages. The Spirit of the Crucified/Risen one who has returned to us has power to break through our barriers of original self doubt or sin which cripples the human desire for relationship. Now freed to be other-tending, we are impelled into a communion of life with others, to celebrate and communicate what we have experienced, namely, our own desirability and a communion-in-Love which is God.

Sebastian, Moore

The Fire and the Rose are One. New York: Seabury, 1981

The Inner Loneliness. London: D.L.&T., 1982

Let This Mind Be In You. London: D.L.&T., 1985
New York: Crossroad, 1989

EMMAUS

Their backs were turned from Jerusalem
the memories of that Friday too bitter
there was nothing to hold them now.

They had hoped -

even that was cause for sour taste.

They'd given him their time

left villages and families to follow;

and what hurt most

they'd given him their hearts.

His words were strange

but they had known his friendship

and learned to trust

even to love

But now!

They walked on

and he joined them.

The dry dust of their journey

and their hearts

clouded their vision.

Weighed down with loss, betrayal, fear

they did not see he travelled with them.

Even when he spoke

recalling a history

they still did not perceive.

Their blind journey continued to Emmaus

and could have gone beyond

but for a word -

a simple shattering word of invitation.

'Stay with us. The darkness is upon us'.

And in the shared darkness

their eyes were opened

and broken hearts healed.

In memory of him became Eucharist

and life to be shared with others.

Surely this is Easter -

not once, a past event.

But in the darkness of our journey

finding a God

walking the dark ways with us

into dawn.