

# In The Beginning – Sin

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My talk is the first in the series, which makes my new title appropriate – "In the beginning – Sin". But of course the title refers to another beginning: the Garden of Eden and the sin which caused us to be thrown out of that blissful state, inevitably and irrecoverably stained. What was this apple which our tūpuna ake (ancestors) ate with such disastrous consequences? For the Middle Ages it was *sex*, which explains why women have had such a bad press in the traditional church beliefs, although how our prototypical ancestors were meant to do without it one wonders. The myth of the garden tends to be discounted these days and the notion of original sin is rejected out of hand; but if we look again, this ancient myth contains useful insights which we are just beginning to grasp.

Sin is associated with humanity from the very beginning. The term in its origin implies *Guilt* . "a transgression of the divine law and an offence against God; a violation (esp. willful or deliberate) of some religious or moral principles" (*S.O.E.D.*)

It has three components:

- a human attitude - guilt/shame
- a 'picture' of God
- a sense of morality i.e. the perception of right and wrong.

The apple was the **fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil**; i.e. it marks the threshold of our moral awareness. It defines a relationship with God – shame and guilt **Who told you that you were naked?** which becomes permanent – original sin. It defines a notion of God: – in the myth, a God who punishes.

The notion of sin is common to all the peoples of the Mediterranean from which our Pakeha (NZ European as opposed to Maori) traditions spring. Mankind is essentially guilty vis-à-vis the gods who are more or less capricious, more or less moral, and who zap mortals on the slightest pretext. The best of them is probably Jahweh; there is only one of him and not a horde; he is righteous and his punishments are corrective and not destructive like the Furies for example.

To rid themselves of sin/guilt the Mediterranean tribes adopted several strategies.

- The Israelites drew up a code of rules – the Torah – to avoid offending the deity; these rules had to be obeyed rigorously by all, in the interests of all, since one transgression would bring down the wrath of God on the whole people as is seen in the example of Achan (Joshua 7,18). The punishment for infringing the rules was severe. Achan and all his family were stoned and burnt. The bible tells us that when Joseph found that Mary was pregnant he decided to put her away without making a scandal. If he had made her condition public, she would have been stoned to death and her baby with her.
- They offered propitiation to the god by way of sacrifice; human sacrifice was regular in the tribes that worshipped Baal. They threw their living babies into the burning belly of a brazen bull to propitiate the God. The story of Abraham going to sacrifice Isaac probably marks the end of human sacrifice in Israel and the ram, providentially caught by the horns in the branches of a desert bush, establishes the notion of an acceptable substitute. The Jews were still offering animal sacrifices of this kind in Jesus' day.
- They looked for a vicarious victim who would carry away the burden of sin – the scapegoat.

The Old Testament bequeaths us a mind-set

- of a God who has the human attributes of a person-other-than-us, who behaves in human ways, who in the case of Jahweh judges and punishes,
- of a chronic state of human guilt and shame, and fear of the consequences
- of a ritual system built on that fear which demands the conformity of the individual to the decrees of a priestly caste and thus assures the political dominance of that caste.

This mind-set, focused on wrong-doing, is essentially negative. As soon as you make rules, you set yourself up to break them; rules expose you to two dangers. Either you keep them and become self-righteous **I thank you Lord that I am not as other men are.** (Luke 18: 11) Or you fail and the failure itself becomes an obsession. Hence sexual sins among clergymen, and addictions to alcohol, drugs and gambling. Sin is addictive.

### WHAT JESUS DID

- He changed the picture of God from King/Judge/Tyrant to Father (*Abba*) and thus took away the haunting fear of God.
- He did away with the "middle man", the priestly intermediaries (**whited sepulchres** Matthew 23,27) and thus removed the abuse of religious authority.
- He put the rules in their place (Healing on the Sabbath, the corn field, Matthew 12; the woman caught in adultery John 8,3)
- He rejected the bribing of God – propitiation. How could a Father God demand payment from his children for his favours? He took a whip to the sellers of animals and the moneychangers who were providing the sacrifices. And he substituted himself as the ultimate sacrifice – the scapegoat – to remove the need of sacrifice.
- He changed the mindset of his people from transgression and punishment to the positive values of love and forgiveness. He provided simple symbolic acts to enable the transformation of his followers into the new mindset and to maintain this positive attitude: baptism and remembering him when they ate and drank together. He set about creating a new attitude – the pure heart – rather than new beliefs.
- The focal centre of his life was being open to the VOICE OF GOD. All his teaching was to open the minds of his hearers to that voice and remove obstacles to its perception. The coming of the holy spirit and the baptism of fire were the climax of his example and his teaching.

### WHAT THE CHURCH HAS DONE SINCE THEN

- It set up a credo based on guilt, propitiation and redemption which turns God back into a tyrant, setting conditions for grace and making God's love, which Jesus taught as being for all, conditional on right belief;
- It took the injunction "Each time you eat and drink, remember me" and turned it into the ritual of communion which should unite but in fact divides the Christian community
- It high-jacked the image of humanity as God's children by the notion of "adoption if you behave".
- It used the threat of God's fearsome retribution to keep their followers in line

The Fathers compounded these distortions:

- Augustine added the neo-platonic notion of the baseness of the material world, giving *sin* the gloss of filth (*Inter faeces et urinam nascimur – We are born between shit and piss*). Calvin and the Jansenists (cf the Puritans) brought this human abasement to perfection.

- Successive Councils from Constantine on established the creeds, defining heresies and building a body of doctrine which gets greater and more absurd century by century, and tortured and burnt people who refused to accept it.
- Millennial apocalyptic fears exaggerated the hope of heaven and the terrors of hell, the consequence of sin, and these fears were exploited to strengthen the political clout of the Church and reinforce its temporal authority..

## OUR AGE – THE THIRD TURNING POINT

We Christians have a concept of God which leaves out half the human race – the women – and excludes as heathen the vast majority of the earth's peoples. We are faced with an edifice of doctrine which does not stand up to critical scrutiny, for example the Trinity. We have in particular a doctrine of propitiation which proposes the absurdity of a God who sacrifices himself to satisfy himself. We are unsure of the basis of our belief as scholarship throws doubt on the historicity of events in the New Testament and regards the records as assertions which advance a particular viewpoint rather than as a historical record. Pictures of God no longer satisfy us wholly – **God the all-terrible king who ordainest**. God has gone beyond the image. Every image reduces God to the comprehensible and distorts the reality. Some deny that God even exists.

Before Jesus there was a strand of prophecy developing which emphasised purity of life rather than ritual observance; which imaged God as tender – a husband longing for a wayward wife, a father lamenting his lost children. It was Jesus who gave this movement the momentum to change the perspective. In the same way throughout the history of the Christian Church there have been many who have protested the distortion of the simple message of love and mutual forgiveness; some of them were burnt for their concern. But it is only in our age that the contradiction between the teaching of the Church and the deep significance of the life of Jesus has become generally obvious. And what are we to do about it? Are we to throw over beliefs which are manifestly untenable and with them the Church itself which has been the civilising force of the Western world, the voice of God to us for 2,000 years; to throw out the whole notion of God? Or do we look to change the mindset again and renew the Body of Christ for the next age?

The Sea of Faith movement is a loose grouping of people world wide some of whom wish to remain within the fabric of the Church but reject, some more, some less of the body of doctrine that makes up the credo of one sect or another. They describe themselves as "exploring and promoting religious faith as a human creation" searching for ways to express the mindset of our time. They have helped me clarify my own perspective, particularly in the matter of sin and guilt.

I suggest therefore that we adopt the same perspective, i.e. go back to the garden and look at what happened there from outside as it were, without a commitment to the traditional interpretation.

The myth of the Garden of Eden marks the decisive moment when we, the human race, became self-aware and separated ourselves definitively from the other animal species. A herd of antelope graze in peace in the company of their predators, the lions. Their only thought is the next blade of grass, the next drink of water. When the lions get hungry there is a frantic burst of activity, adrenalin fired and terror driven, the slowest is killed, and the herd sets about grazing again, in complete tranquillity. They live in a continuous present, meeting each eventuality with the instinctive response triggered by their genes, moving sunrise by sunrise towards their last sunset, completely unaware of their passage through time. This is the Garden-of-Eden state.

We became aware! Our big brains reached out to understand the world around us; we invented language and then writing and with that created history, we mastered the soil, we domesticated the animals, we tracked the stars in their passage, we mastered fire, we made

iron, we split the atom, we are splitting the living cell, we mastered the air, we are mastering space. The only limit to our mastery is our imagination. What we can imagine we can do. What a wonderful gift. But at what a cost!

**To the woman he said: "I will multiply your pains in child-bearing, you shall give birth to your children in pain". To the man he said: "Accursed be the soil because of you. With suffering shall you get your food from it."**

The apple of awareness which we so rashly and so inevitably plucked, cast us out of the timeless existence of the animals. In the morning we remembered the predators of the evening before, we remembered from day to day the hardships of famine and thirst, we remembered the pain of child-birth, we knew that we were born and that we would die. Awareness took away from us the tranquil nirvana of the animals and replaced it with fear. We have been picking the apple of knowledge ever since; and every new discovery brings with it consequences we tremble over: fire; gun-powder; atomic fission and fusion; genetic manipulation. Every discovery means progress and danger, as it has since the day the woman took the apple and gave it to her husband.

You will remember that it was the fruit of the tree of knowledge of Good and Evil which Eve picked and gave to Adam. Moral awareness, that is to say the awareness of the other person as another self and the mutual obligations that bind us to each other, – **Do to others as you would have them do to you** – is an essential component of this wonderful awareness. Another essential component is our relationship with God. Both of these derive from a significant uniquely human characteristic:- the ability to imagine the ideal and compare it with the actual: What I did as opposed to what I might have done. These components working together produce inevitably the mindset of sin. We were set up for it from the outset.

## SET UP TO SIN

Life was hard for our ancestors. Drought and famine, fire and flood, lightning, earthquakes, volcanoes, plague and pestilence – so many inflictions of a cruel and capricious universe. In our search for understanding, how were they to be explained? In the traditions from which the European peoples have sprung mankind identified the unknown with the divine. The hail which flattened your crops, or the sickness which afflicted your children came from God or the Gods. You can see in the Genesis story the attribution of responsibility for these hardships to God, as a punishment for eating that blessed apple. The Gods were invented to explain the inexplicable.

Fear peopled the universe with Gods of our making whom we set out to serve. Relative to the Gods we were powerless; however good we were, whatever bribes we offered, the hail and the earthquake, the drought and the flood still came. The book of Job reflects that perception. The only human attitude possible was for us, like him, to sit on the dung-heap and scrape our boils with a bit of a broken pot: to grovel in abasement before the Lord. These Gods reflect our own psyche and the nature of our fears. Baal was cruel and capricious, the mirror of the sado-masochistic tendencies buried in us; the Greek Pantheon was as self-centred and untrustworthy as the people who worshipped them; the Jahweh of the Israelites was rigorously righteous, a judge to punish wrong-doing. The view of the Sea of Faith is right, up to a point, when it proposes that religion is a human invention, and that the "God" we worship is made in our own image.

This fear of the unknown was compounded by that other essential ability – to measure the actual against the ideal. Measured against the Gods humans are always inferior and powerless. Measured against what we know to be ideal, our efforts are always imperfect. Paul sums it up "**The good that we would we do not, and the evil that we would not, that we do.**" (Rom 7:19) or as the Jerusalem Bible puts it : "though the will to do what is good is in me, the performance is not, with the result that instead of doing the good things I want to do, I carry out the sinful things I do not want." This attitude is reflected in the words used for sin in

the New Testament – **opheilemata** – debts; **paraptomata** – falling aside; **hamartía** – falling short. In a world of ignorance and fear we are condemned inevitably to this perspective.

The perception of sin is a uniquely human attribute. We have always regarded it as bad and tried to be rid of it as the rules and the sacrifices we looked at in the first section show. But have we misunderstood its significance?

## SIN AND EVOLUTION

It is time to take an overview of evolution. Where did we come from and where are we heading? The Garden of Eden represents the animal state in which all behaviour is governed by our instincts. That instinctual state strongly influences our behaviour still. But humans are pack animals and have succeeded in the evolutionary competition by collaborative action. The inherent selfishness of the gene-driven instincts must therefore be modified within the group – family, race or sect – so that collective action is possible. It is the nature of our evolution as a species that the grouping in which we see ourselves, family, clan, nation, has grown larger and larger until in our day it potentially embraces not only all the races and creeds of our species, but the whole fabric of nature as well. This is the difference between Jesus' time and our own and defines the special tensions of the 20th century as nations merge and blend, as tribalisms assert themselves, blaze up and hopefully die out, as supranational organisations superimpose themselves on races and creeds. This shift in human perspective has necessitated a huge shift in attitudes. The instinctual drives are still strong in us; you could regard them as original sin. The course of evolution has been marked by the progressive mastery of them and their transformation into what we might call spiritual human as opposed to material human.

The imperative of evolution has been the transformation of the instinctual into the spiritual. And the driving mechanism of this transformation has been the apple – the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of right and wrong. The perception of sin is not a human handicap but rather the precious well-spring of our unique role in the evolution of the universe, or as I would put it, in the Becoming of God. This catalyst of change is part of us all individually, and it acts in each of us at every moment of every day. The future of the universe depends not on what America or China or Shell Oil or the Hamilton City Council decide to do but on the choices that you and I make in the course of our daily life, on our free-will.

That perception makes one realise what we owe to Jesus. A man for his time and for ours, he avoided crowds and spoke to individuals – **Let him who has not sinned cast the first stone**. He laid the foundation for the attitudes of spiritual humanity: not fear but love, not domination but service, not a God-Tyrant but a Father; not conformity with an oppressive religious authority but a heart open directly to the inspiration of the divine.

## THE VOICE

**The nature of God.** As we have seen, sin and the picture we make of God are two sides of the same medallion. What sort of a God do we make for ourselves in our age? A more fundamental question for the 21st century is "Is there a God at all?" since all the Gods of past ages turn out to be human inventions. In the Garden God spoke. God spoke to Abraham and to Isaac and to Jacob, to all the heroes of the bible and to many of the villains as well. Most supremely Jesus was perfectly obedient to the divine voice. From the beginnings of humanity until now the human race has had as a constant the experience of divine guidance. Was that just a human fabrication too? For myself, the pattern of evolution from slime to creature, from creature to mammal and from mammal to homo sapiens is the progression of creation with purpose. The constant sense of a divine presence in history which personal experience confirms makes me assert the reality of the inner voice which is the testimony of the existence of the divine. God IS and we are back to the first definition which the bible gives us:- **I AM**. In our age a picture

is no longer necessary; it is enough to acknowledge the Presence and listen to the voice, which is none other than that awareness which convicts us of sin. As has already been said, this is the spirit of God within us and among us; this is the driving force of evolution; this makes humanity the leading shoot of God's becoming in the universe.

Listening is not as easy as it sounds. We are each the battleground between the instinctual and the spiritual; unless we are aware of the process and in tune with the VOICE there are many things to distract us. The surge of passion – lust or hatred; self-interest i.e. money, influence, dominance; mob dynamics; the most insidious of all is self-righteousness, the one-eyed attachment to a creed or cause. It is this that Jesus was hardest on. Time and again, though our will is set to do what is right we fall by the way (*paraptomata*), we come short of the mark (*hamartia*), we fail to fulfil our obligations (*opheilemata*). In a sense we, each of us, carry round with us a personal Armageddon the results of which, victory or defeat, bring closer the transformation into our true spiritual end, which in traditional language is the kingdom of heaven, (see Synopsis). We have defined original sin as the permanence of our instinctual nature. We can now put a definition to the unforgivable sin. It is that state of mind which makes us impervious to the voice of God. It is a heart so hardened in its attachment to wealth and power, so indifferent to the welfare of others, so self-righteously convinced of its own rightness, that it is incapable of listening. Its sin is unforgivable because it has closed itself to forgiveness. The voice of God works best in the humble, open, loving heart.

I have suggested that while it is clear that in the past our images of God are clearly our creation, and have no inherent validity, that is not a reason for denying the existence of the divine. That brings me to the Church and the question of what we do about it. There is no doubt that the church as we know it is founded on stultifying and untenable doctrines built on guilt, that it is relatively ineffective, that it is the gathering place of nutters and petty tyrants, that it is seamed with factions and exudes self-righteousness like an unholy sweat. But those are the characteristics of the people within it, Are they reasons to throw it over? And if we do, what do we put in its place?

To get a perspective on this question it would be helpful to go back to the laws of the Old Testament which Jesus appears to attack. If they are allowed to become an end in themselves they breed self-righteousness, as we see in the Pharisees of the New Testament, and they block out the Spirit's voice. But if they serve to remind the Jew of God's presence in every action of every day, then they further the work of the Spirit in the life. It is not the tool, in this case the Law, which is good or bad, but the use that is made of it. So it is with the traditional Christian church. Like its members it is full of inadequacies, of errors and downright wrongdoing. But worship every Sunday, communion (whatever meaning you attach to it) every day, or every week, or month or even three times a year, grace before every meal and the other disciplines of the faith serve as punctuation marks in the passage of life, a little pause to give significance to its elements, to bring us face to face with the reality of the Kingdom of heaven, the human evolution into spiritual being. This is the value of the simple ritual Jesus gave us. "Whenever you break bread and drink wine together, remember me".

For the fact is we do fall by the way, we do come short of our ideals and aspirations. We sometimes do terrible things, even to those we love. We need to be transformed from the world of instinct and fear to the spiritual world of love and forgiveness. For some the transformation is slow and imperceptible, for some it comes like the flames of Pentecost but for all it must be maintained by whatever means are available, the traditional church for want of better, until it becomes as total in us as it was in Jesus.

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## SYNOPSIS

### AXIOMS

1. That the biblical myths of human unworthiness are wrong both as far as humans are concerned and also in the way they portray the nature of the divine. What we are, is what we are meant to be.
2. That the divine purpose of Jesus's life was to liberate us from the destructive beliefs of the past. But under the inevitable influence of those beliefs the early Church distorted the lessons of the master's life, to make doctrines which were the antithesis of what he taught – notably in the importance of doctrine itself, and in the doctrines of sin, propitiation, redemption and salvation. The Fathers from Augustine on distorted that lesson further by exaggerating human abasement – *inter faeces et urinam nascimur. We are born between shit and piss.*
3. That God **IS**, over and above anything that the human mind is capable of conceiving; that while different images of the divine help us to envisage God's existence, all our notions of God are of no consequence in defining divinity and in particular the distinction between a subjective and an objective divinity is meaningless.

### THE PATTERN OF EVOLUTION

Mankind is evolving from an animal state, characterised by:

- a survival instinct which justifies any and every action necessary for individuals to save themselves from death;
- the pack instinct which drives some individuals to dominate their fellows, which draws others to follow unquestioningly the dominant individual and which maintains the discipline of the pack by social or physical sanctions;
- the securing and defence of territories to guarantee the resources needed by the pack;
- the unbridled exercise of the reproductive urge justified by thin rationalisations and without regard to the consequences.

We are evolving into a spiritual state characterised by:

- a concern for others and a willingness to die for them if necessary;
- a refusal of dominance – the leader is to be a servant; the rejection of the pack dynamic – the future rests on individual choice;
- collaboration in the husbanding of the earth's resources so that there is enough for all;
- a rational bridle on reproduction to compensate for the loss of the natural balancing mechanisms which, until this century, kept populations in check – disease, famine and war.

This process will be completed not by dominance and the use of the mob but by the action of individuals and groups of individuals who are willing to "listen":– to their conscience, to an inner vision, to a conjunction of circumstances, or to whatever other medium the "voice of God" may be heard by, and who of their own free will do what this "voice" prompts them. This is the model which we take from Christ.

**Three turning points:**

"Who told you that you were naked?"

Jesus

The "post-modern, post-Christian, post-everything" -- now

**Three attitudes:**

an attitude to knowledge

a "picture" of God

A sense of our own inadequacy.

**One constant:**

A sense of divine direction.

## SECTION HEADINGS

**IN THE BEGINNING – SIN**

The first mention of humanity in the bible is associated with sin. Sin = guilt

**STRATEGIES TO SHED THE BURDEN OF SIN**

Rules; Propitiation; a Scapegoat

**THE OLD TESTAMENT MINDSET.**

- a God "out there" who behaves in human fashion.
- a chronic state of human guilt and shame, and fear of the consequences
- a ritual system built on that fear

**WHAT JESUS DID**

- He changed the picture of God from King/Judge/Tyrant to Father; from fear to love
- He removed the abuse of religious authority.
- He put the rules in their place
- He rejected propitiation; he substituted himself as the ultimate sacrifice – the scapegoat – to remove the need of sacrifice.
- He changed the mindset of his people from transgression and punishment to the positive values of love and forgiveness.
- He set the example of a life open to the VOICE OF GOD.

**WHAT THE CHURCH HAS DONE SINCE THEN**

Largely reversed all these changes.

**OUR AGE – THE THIRD TURNING POINT**

The discrepancies between Church doctrine and the life of Jesus have come to clarity in our time and demand a reaction from us.

**THE RETURN TO THE GARDEN**

The myth of the Garden marks the beginning of human awareness. It is reinterpreted in the light of evolution

**SET UP TO SIN**

The nature of our awareness makes a sinful perception of life inevitable

**SIN AND EVOLUTION**

The perception of sin is the driving force of evolutionary change; individual free will is its instrument; the Becoming of God is manifested in the choices made by individuals between perceived right and wrong

**THE VOICE**

God has outgrown the pictures; the divine presence is manifested by an inner voice which guides. Many obstacles to the clear perception of that voice. The use of the instruments of church practice to maintain openness. Jesus the model