On Christian ‘Sin’

The two readings appointed for this morning direct us to think about sin. Initially, however, when considering the topic of my sermon, I tried to avoid it. I looked around for an alternative. I didn’t want to talk about sin. Why was that?

Sin is a downbeat topic, of course, but it’s also a feature of Christianity that its secularist critics find deeply unattractive. Last month I was in conversation with Michael Ruse for a radio programme to be broadcast in November. Michael is a philosopher of science and religion and the author of numerous books on Darwinism. The focus of our discussion was war. I was representing the mainstream Christian view that war can sometimes be morally justified, and I expressed scepticism towards Stephen Pinker’s thesis that the world is gradually becoming less violent and that the prospect of the abolition of war is therefore within view. Michael accused me of being pessimistic and attributed my Christian pessimism to St Augustine’s doctrine of original sin—that is, the idea that human beings inherit sin, that we are born into it, that we are encumbered with it from the very beginning. In fact, it’s an idea that Augustine borrowed from St Paul, but since it doesn’t appear in our second reading this morning from the Epistle to the Romans, I’m not going to dwell on it now.

My focus here is on the fact that the Christian idea of sin attracts the accusation that we Christians are pessimists. And so, initially, when considering the topic of my sermon this morning, I didn’t want to live down to the hostile stereotype. I wanted to avoid talking about sin.

But this morning’s two readings constrained me not to avoid it. Indeed, they constrained me to stop, turn around, and challenge the stereotype. For Christianity cannot be simply pessimistic. After all, it’s not simply about sin, but also about salvation. It’s not all about
bad news; it’s also about good news. If it thinks there’s a problem—and it certainly does—it also thinks there’s a solution. That’s the Gospel of Christ.

So the Christian view is not simply pessimistic; rather, it is realistic. This has been made clear to me in the long-running debate about the legalisation of physician-assisted suicide, in which one of the main issues is the possible abuse of vulnerable people, especially the elderly. Opponents of legalisation worry that the elderly would sometimes be manipulated by impatient carers or greedy relatives to ‘choose’ assisted suicide, if that option were available to them. Against this, proponents of legalisation confidently assert that a carefully formulated law, prescribing procedural safeguards, would prevent abuse.

As a Christian, I find the proponents to be astonishingly naïve. The thought that healthcare professionals might fail to follow the prescribed procedures, or might manipulate them, seems never to have crossed their minds. But to me, for whom the notion of sin is perfectly familiar, the idea that doctors and nurses might be careless, impatient, dishonest, and even sometimes resentful and vindictive—especially in an institutional environment where resources of money, personnel, and time are constantly limited—is entirely thinkable. The Christian dogma of sin inclines me to entertain the possibility of professional failure and abuse.

And empirical evidence confirms the dogma. According to the charity Age UK, up to 500,000 elderly people are being abused by their carers at any one time in Britain. And only five years ago a report revealed that the Mid-Staffordshire Health-care Trust had for years presided over the shocking mistreatment of patients by professional carers.

So Christianity is not exactly pessimistic, because it proclaims good news, as well as bad. But through the idea of sin it is realistic about the weakness, and sometimes the malice, of human beings. That’s my first main point.

So now that I’ve persuaded myself, and perhaps you, that the Christian idea of sin is something of which to be proud rather than ashamed, let’s consider what our two readings this morning have to say about it. And let’s start with the passage from the Epistle to the Romans.

What shall we say, then? [asks St Paul] Is the law sinful? Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting (7: 7–8)
The law—the Jewish Torah—states what is right and wrong, what we should do and what we shouldn’t. Knowing this, however, doesn’t stop us doing what is wrong. We know what’s right, and part of us wants to do it, and yet we don’t. As Paul wrote later in the same chapter:

I do not understand what I do…. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it…. [I]n my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me …? (7: 15, 19, 23–24)

One important thing to draw from this is that, as Paul sees it, sin is not merely ignorance—it’s not merely our lack of knowledge about what’s right and wrong. It’s not merely moral. It’s far deeper than that; it’s a spiritual power, waging war against us, imprisoning us.

To long-standing Christians, steeped in the New Testament, that might seem like common sense. But it’s not. For Aristotle, for example, the root of wrongdoing lies in ignorance. And the same is implied by Islam, according to which salvation comes in the form of enlightenment: the revelation of right and wrong in Shari’a—in Islamic law. The problem is moral ignorance; the solution, the revelation of moral knowledge. Not so, for St Paul or for St Augustine or for subsequent Christian tradition. For them both the problem and the solution lie deeper. That’s my second main point.

My third point comes from our first reading from Genesis, which tells the myth of Adam and Eve’s Fall from original innocence. Moral knowledge does play a role here, but it’s an immediately perplexing one. Eve tells the serpent that God has forbidden her and Adam to eat the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden, lest they die. The serpent replies:

“You will not certainly die…. For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. (3: 4–6)

The very desire for moral knowledge or wisdom is presented here as being sinful, which at first sight does seem odd. On reflection, however, I think it does make sense. What’s being said is that in a happy, healthy friendship, where the parties naturally treat one another well and justly, and so where trust reigns, questions of right and wrong simply
don’t arise and there is no need for moral knowledge. Where justice and charity naturally reign, there is no need for law. So the very fact that Eve desired to know good and evil was a symptom that trust had already broken down. The dawn of moral consciousness was a fruit of sin, but not the root.

What, then, was the root? According to our passage the root of sin appears to lie in Eve’s aspiration to rise to equality with God. As the serpent told her: “when you eat from [the tree] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God”. The root of sin is the refusal to be content with a position of creaturely dependence upon God, and the ambition instead to become His equal. At bottom, then, sin is spiritual arrogance or pride. That’s my third point.

So far, first, I’ve said that the Christian idea of sin is nothing to be embarrassed by. It’s not pessimistic, it is qualified by hope, and it’s realistic.

Second, that sin is not fundamentally about moral ignorance.

Deeper than that, third, that it consists in spiritual pride.

My fourth, final, and briefest point is that the therapy for spiritual pride is the bending of the knee in the worship of God. So I leave you with the good news that what you’re doing here and now is the very first step on the road to salvation.