

ARCHDIOCESE OF GLASGOW



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St Paul contrasts the life of Christians with that of the pagan world in which they lived. There are many who today suggest that we live in a post-Christian society which has much in common, morally speaking, with the society which proved a difficult terrain for the feet of Christian evangelists and a heavy soil in which to plant the seed of faith.

That ancient world was not without its gods. Indeed it seemed populated with gods. Though they were larger than life they tended on the whole to bear the characteristics of mere mortals often to an extravagant degree. Nonetheless there was a sense that men were accountable if not to their betters above, at least to those whose power, as expressed through the material world, would humiliate and intimidate them.

There are those today who ape the paganism of old and revive what they imagine to be ancient customs and worship Mother Earth and adopt some of those practices which St Paul described as of the night. On the whole, however, modern gods are celluloid stars and the heroes of fiction. Though many would wish to emulate them and share their glamour, no-one considers them as forming a tribunal to which individuals and nations are accountable. More sober and pragmatic non-Christians increasingly see themselves as accountable to no-one, but themselves.

Where once morality was expressed in terms of obedience to a divine law, now it is likely to be, at best, a calculation of what might be for the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people, saving always that one's own happiness is paramount; whether that happiness of the group or of the individual is of short term advantage or longer term achievement, appears on the whole irrelevant.

This is not to suggest that Christian morality has in practice been forever altruistic, nor even to suggest that in its roots it was always perfect. Revelation came gradually and through it a gradual perfecting of the law. "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" was assuredly a morality not so much justifying retaliation, but containing retribution within limits – the limits of the treatment meted out to those offended.

In the Old Testament there are moments of profound insight, when instead of a morality of restriction there came counsels of generosity: "Love thy neighbour as thyself"; Old Testament morality is nonetheless characterised by what one might call a morality of boundaries: "*Thou shalt not kill; Thou shalt not commit adultery; Thou shalt not steal; Thou shalt not bear false witness.*" At least in the terms of this morality, responsibility was on the part of the individual not to transgress, and forgiveness was always an option on the part of those offended. We find in the prayer that Christ himself taught us: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

I sometimes wonder whether there is a completely different slant when today our moral focus is on rights. We form pressure groups to establish them through the democratic process, with the danger of the stronger becoming ever stronger and the weak ever weaker, those with political clout succeeding, where those without it are left behind. This is not to suggest that a Bill of Rights is in any way a sinister thing; only that it is a different way of looking at morality, stressing what is due to us, enabling us to vindicate our cause through the legal system, instead of our considering what we owe to others and giving it out of a sense of duty.

When Jesus was asked *what was the greatest commandment*, he answered famously: “The first is thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy mind, with all thy strength, and the second is like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” On this, he said, “hung the whole law and the prophets.” Our clear duty is not to be motivated simply by a sense of justice, but by love. At the Last Supper that love transcended the human to become in a real sense divine: “This is my commandment, love one another as I have loved you.” That is not going to be possible without Christ’s example and grace – that power created in us through the gift of the Holy Spirit. That remains, however, not simply an ideal but the law of the Christian life, the duty of the disciple of Christ.

The classic exposition of Our Lord’s teaching is found of course in the so-called *Sermon of the Mount*, recorded in the Synoptic Gospels, that is Matthew, Mark and Luke - above all in Matthew where it is in fact located on the mountainside and in Luke where ironically it is in a wide plain. Whatever the true geographical context, there is a radical shift in doctrine – a marked difference between Christ’s teaching and that of the Old Testament as indicated by the oft repeated phrase: *You heard how it was said of old that you should behave in such and such a fashion, but I say to you: “I say this to you who are listening: love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who treat you badly.”*

To act in that way could not be closer to His action who on the cross was treated with the greatest cruelty and cursed by the passers-by. “Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate”, he says, “Do not judge and you will not be judged yourselves; do not condemn and you will not be condemned yourselves; grant pardon and you will be pardoned.”

We live in a society not marked by pardons. No longer does the lawgiver dispense mercy as well as justice; juries hear the clamour of those who seek vengeance, and judges are not beyond the intimidating influence of public opinion. Increasingly we hear of cases being reviewed on the suspicion of a miscarriage of justice and of a hundred persons waiting for such a review in one category of crime alone. The recent quashing of a conviction on a mother of having smothered her babies has led to a call for further judicial reviews. Had mercy been at hand, would so many vulnerable people have been condemned?

St Paul sums all this up neatly in his Letter to the Ephesians in the passage we heard read: “In a word, as God’s dear children, you must be like him. Live in love, as Christ loved you. He gave himself up on your behalf, an offering and sacrifice whose fragrance is pleasing to God.”

He narrates a catalogue of sins and crimes which he says: “must not be so much as mentioned among you, as befits the people of God.” He speaks to those who have known transition from darkness to light in coming from paganism to Christianity: “Though you were once darkness, now as Christians you are light, for where light is, there is a harvest of goodness, righteousness and truth.”

We need perhaps on our own imaginative journey to think what we would have been like had it not been for the Gospel of Christ and his grace: moved by selfishness, motivated by petty dislikes, fired at times by anger and hatred – oh yes, if we know ourselves well enough we know what we are capable of, and many a one has said: “But for the grace of God, there go I.”

The conclusion we are to draw is not one of pride in our achievement, since it is all His, but rather of thanksgiving. “Let the Holy Spirit fill you”, says St Paul, “speak to one another in psalms, hymns and songs; sing and make music from your heart to the Lord.”

Our Sunday worship is a precious hour of thanksgiving for a week’s grace. Our thanksgiving, however, is not so constrained: “In the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ”, counsels St Paul, “give thanks *every day* for everything to our God and Father.”