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READING GENESIS (PART III)

The tradition of reading the books of the Law in preparation for Easter, beginning at Septuagesima with Genesis, is a kind of catechesis of the Church in the doctrines of creation and providence, sin and redemption. They must be read in the light of the New Testament to be fully understood; yet already in them we perceive the basic lineaments of Christian belief, and apart from them the New Testament itself cannot be understood. In two previous issues of the Parish Paper (Nos. 10 & 11) I have touched on the doctrines of creation and providence, including the doctrine of man, made in the image of God.

The doctrine of creation testifies to the goodness of creation. Everything made by God is "good" (Genesis 1.4, 12, 18, 21, 24), and as a whole the world he made is "very good" (Genesis 1.31). At the same time, however, we unquestionably experience the pervasive presence and power of evil in the world. Whence then this evil? Standing foursquare on the testimony of Genesis to the goodness of God's work in creation, and the goodness of the God who created the world, the Church fought long and hard against the Gnostic teaching, that evil arises out of the materiality of creation. Guided chiefly by the teaching of Saint Augustine, the church pointed to the defect of the will, both human and demonic, as the source of evil. Specifically, the church accepted the doctrine, formulated by Saint Augustine, of original, or inherited, sin: man is not a sinner because he sins; rather, man sins because he is a sinner. His nature is sinful, not because of a defect in creation, but as a result of Adam's primal disobedience. The meaning of the story, told in images of poetic beauty in Genesis 2-4, is summarized by St. Paul in Romans 5.12: "by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin". As a result of Adam's disobedience, all human beings born into the world inherit a nature distorted and crippled by sin (Psalm 51.5). We are born into the world not where Adam began, in the original righteousness of paradise, in harmony with God and man, but where he left off, in the wilderness, alienated from God, and unable, of our own power, to restore ourselves to communion with him. The ancient ceremonies of public penance practiced on Ash Wednesday testify to our solidarity with Adam in his sin: "Remember, O man, that dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (cf. Genesis 3.19).

As with other doctrines formulated by Saint Augustine, many Christians would prefer a more optimistic, less disturbing explanation for evil. As with other doctrines of Saint Augustine, however, no one has come up with very convincing alternatives. Those who seek to do

without the doctrine generally fall into shallow optimism, or complacent self-justification, the shifting of blame: "the woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat" (Genesis 3.13).

In truth, as it has been said, the doctrine of original sin is perhaps the only doctrine for which there is empirical proof. The last century and half of utopian idealism, of hopes for a better world constructed by man for man, is one grim testimony after another to the perversion of the human will, issuing in the basest crimes of Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, Pol Pot, Milosevic and Saddam Hussein. The peasants being raped, tortured, murdered, and driven into exile from Darfur, the wretched destruction of Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe, the miseries of Iraq: these are not exceptional in human history, they are the rule. What is surprising is not that such evils are found in the world, but that anything good is. Nor do they belong to some stage of human progress which we have bypassed. The same things have taken place, and will probably take place again, in the most advanced societies of the world. Nor are western societies, like Canada and the USA, exempt: the extraordinary willingness of our societies to discount voiceless human life, points to the same heart of darkness.

It is not that there are not many very nice people in the world. By divine providence, we have been socialized to restrain our darkest impulses: but the darkest impulses still course through the heart, and in the crimes of the wicked we see them fully enacted. There are many nice people in the world, but there are few that are truly good.

The heart of the problem of evil within God's world is the problem of the disobedient heart. As Saint Paul said, "the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do" (Romans 7.19). "O wretched man that I am!" he asks, "who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (7.24, 25). Only the obedience of the Son of God, perfected in suffering and death, can overcome the legacy of Adam. The cross is thus both the supreme demonstration of original sin, and the supreme demonstration of divine love, victorious over sin.

Along with man's fall into sin, and the consequences of that fall enacted and endured in every generation, Genesis also testifies to man's redemption by Christ, yet to come: "where sin abounded" says Saint Paul, "grace did much more abound" (Romans 5.20). Over against the curse of sin (Genesis 3.17-19) God gives the promise of blessing to Abraham and his seed forever (Genesis 12.1-7), a promise which then becomes the basis of God's redemption of Israel from bondage in Egypt (Exodus 2.23-25; 3.15-17), and which will find its true fulfillment in Christ (Luke 1.46-55; 68-79; Galatians 3). In the time from Septuagesima through Lent to Easter, we rehearse in the reading of the books of the Law these basic doctrines of the faith, of creation and providence, sin and redemption: therein we travel from Adam through Christ to God.

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