

### Hamartiology - Easter 3, 2024.

There are some wonderful stories about old school examiners, the type you just don't see any more - back in the day when you had exams which actually tested what you were supposed to know, and that you were expected to pass with a high percentage mark.

When Sheila and I were taking the Primary Fellowship exam for the Royal College of Surgeons of England, the expected failure rate was 85%, and there were still such examiners. None of the exams were done on computer, as computers were still to become a tool in everyday life, and were still in the realm of experimentation and development.

The exam was divided into three parts; an MCQ, an essay paper, and several vivas.

Though this episode did not happen to either of us, one candidate was in for one of his oral examinations, and the examiner, rather bored towards the end of the afternoon, got up and to stretch his legs and wandered over to the window, saying, "Boy, follow me."

The 'boy', a qualified doctor, about 28 years old, duly followed the great man, who put his hand into his jacket pocket where he kept a selection of the small carpal bones of the wrist, of which there are eight of differing shapes and sizes.

Without taking his eyes off whatever he was watching out of the window, the examiner

selected one of the pieces from his pocket, and without even turning round, thrust his hand backwards to the student and barked, "Tell me what bone that is, Boy, and from which side!"

The student took the offering and said not a word; the examiner barks again, "Come on, come on, we haven't got all day!"

The student still says nothing, looking at what is in his hand with complete puzzlement.

Exasperated, the examiner finally turns away from the window to the hapless student, "Well, say **something**, for God's sake! What have you got in your hand? Describe it!"

The candidate finally manages to stammer, "You appear to have given me a piece of Cadbury's chocolate, sir!"

When my turn came for the Pathology viva, amongst other specimens that I was handed and asked to describe and diagnose, was a jar with a heart in it, and within the heart was a mass that clearly shouldn't have been there, and might possibly have been responsible for the patient's demise.

When presented with such a case - that is, a tumour in a place it shouldn't be - we are trained to go through what is called the 'surgical sieve'. This is aimed at helping us decide what sort of tumour (growth) it is by

listing all the possibilities, and then working out which it is most likely to be of all those.

We start out with the two main categories: Congenital or Acquired - was the patient born with this, or did it appear later?

Then the question, 'Benign or malignant?'

I'll save you from the rest of the surgical sieve for today, but if anyone wants tutoring in surgery, come and see me afterwards.

The tumour was an acquired benign hamartoma. Now it has taken me around five hundred words to reach that one, because I want you to be quite clear what it is that I am talking about this morning. A hamartoma.

I use the word because the word for sin used in the Greek is *ἁμαρτία* (hamartia), and it means, literally, error - or to err, as a verb, or miss the mark.

I feel the need to discuss this topic because I think that many people blame religion for loading guilt upon human beings through the weight of perceived sins.

Having just come from the Cross and Resurrection of Easter, it might seem a bit of knight's move to suddenly jump into the morass of what is meant by sin, but I think if we are to gain any sense of triumph or relief from the amazing impact of the Resurrection, we need

to have a clear picture of where we were and where we are now.

In a religious context, sin is a transgression against divine law or a law of the deities. Each culture has its own interpretation of what it means to commit a sin. While sins are generally considered actions, any thought, word, or act considered immoral, selfish, shameful, harmful, or alienating might be termed "sinful".

It is most often associated with Greek tragedy, although it is also used in Christian theology. The term is often said to depict the flaws or defects of a character and portraying these as the reason of a potential downfall. However, other critics point to the term's

derivation and say that it refers only to a tragic but random accident or mistake, with devastating consequences but with no judgment implied as to the character.

The term was originally used by Aristotle, who lived from 384 to 322 BC, in his *Poetics*, but its use in Greek tragedy is not quite the same as that used in Christian theology - or even other theologies. What qualifies as the error or flaw varies, and can include an error resulting from ignorance, an error of judgment, an inherent flaw in the character, or a wrongdoing. The spectrum of meanings has invited debate among critics and scholars and different interpretations among dramatists.

But in our readings today, we are pounded on the subject of sin by John in his letter to the churches of Asia Minor.

I have to say that I don't agree with John entirely on his blanket interpretation and condemnation. He seems to have forgotten that the apostles who knew and lived with Jesus continued to make mistakes, and did so even after the resurrection. So, I cannot hold with his statement that 'No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.'

If that were true we'd be in dire trouble. So would the apostles; it is precisely **because** we have know him - and they had seen him too -

that our need for forgiveness remains, and our love for him grows.

To suggest that because we have made further mistakes or made further wrong decisions, we are now cast into outer darkness, is monstrous. To say 'No one who lives in him keeps on sinning,' is to fly in the face of reality. We do, and we will, continue to sin - in the sense of going astray. Sometimes because of our own foolish decisions, and sometimes because we have been led astray by others.

That is why John's last statement is probably the most important; 'Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray.'

Throughout history, and even within the early church, including the apostles themselves, wrong deeds were perpetrated; Peter ran from Rome; Paul admits he kept on sinning - though he tried not to - as did Luther, many centuries later. And Polycarp, Irenaeus, Augustine, Origen, and Constantine were all flawed leaders of the early church. None of us escapes our humanity and the tendency to take the wrong turn from time to time.

What this means is that we need to be in constant contact with God, and listen to him to try and keep us on the right road.

Living with sin - or errors - as we do, every day, is not easy. In order to avoid hypocrisy, such as that of the Pharisees of Jesus' day, we have to admit to ourselves (at least) that we still don't get it all right right all the time.

Based on that, the Roman Catholic Church's doctrine of guilt keeps its confessional boxes and collection plates full. It also means that most of their visitors will be pretty fluent in the Hail Mary prayer.

But here - over on the 'dark side' of the Protestant Church, we are not free of guilt either, but within my understanding of the process of redemption, we do not have to go around with a face like a shovel and an

attitude to match. How does that thank Jesus for his sacrifice, or glorify him for his resurrection?

Yet again, we need to be careful of Martin Luther's injunction, 'Pecca fortiter, sed crede fortius,' which means 'sin boldly, but believe more strongly.'

He developed this idea in a letter he wrote to his great associate, Melancthon, where he explains his theory of justification by faith alone.

He suggests that if he is saved by faith in Christ, then it really doesn't matter at all if he goes on sinning, because he will always be forgiven again. But we are not encouraged to

go on being bad people or keep on making the same mistakes time after time. Jesus would say to people whose sins he had forgiven, 'Go, and sin no more.'

Jesus would know, however, that he had not just created the next totally sinless person - only he was that - but that he had, by his grace, started the process of a change in that person. We are works in progress.

Imagine that you want to paint a room in your house, and that it has a horrible old wallpaper on it, covered with even more horrible paint. You have to start by getting rid of the old wallpaper; then underneath that you find yet more

vile paint - and so on. One layer at a time we gradually try to become better people, and achieve the sort of colour that is pleasing to the eye.

Sin, mistakes, errors, unforeseen happenings that land us in trouble are not going to cease happening just because we picked up a stone and placed it at the foot of the cross. No - we need figuratively to pick up a different stone each day and leave another one there.

It's a bit like a game of scrabble; the idea is to get rid of all your letters (your stones) before the game ends - or you die. Whatever is left on your slate is counted against you. And when you put down some letters in a word, you have to pick up others.

As we lay some stones at the foot of the cross, so we find we have picked up others that we must now try and get rid of.

The fact is that God can see that we are trying to get rid of our letters - we are making the effort to be better people; we not just amassing more and more letters and saying, 'Blow this for a lark, I'll just collect all the letters I can! So what?'

The answer to that is that the score against you at the end of the game is going to be colossal.

'Pecca fortiter' is not a recipe for life, and justification by faith alone - without a change



in life style - is not going to work either -  
much as I like Luther.

It's no good just saying to the examiner,  
'Thanks for the chocolate!', and walking out.

The point is that no matter how hard you try,  
you are not going to ever be white as snow, as  
Isaiah suggests, and Jesus recognizes us as  
humans in this world. What we can do is to try  
to get the old wallpaper and ugly old paint off  
the walls of the room we are trying to  
renovate; we can make an effort,  
understanding that it will not be achieved this  
side of the grass.

None of the apostles managed it, so it is  
hardly likely that we will either. The crucial  
thing is to make the effort.