

THE ROOTS OF EVIL.

CHAPTER 12.

Shakespeare put into the mouth of Cassius the words:

“The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
But in ourselves, that we are underlings”.

John Donne preached: “Honour not the malice of thine enemy so much, as to say thy misery comes from him..” They both agree that it is from the inadequacies of human beings that most evils spring; from the inadequacies of ourselves that most of the evils we suffer arise. Generally it is no good blaming fate, or luck, of God, or the devil. But just occasionally it is. What is the proper response when some monstrous tyrant looms, when perverted law becomes an instrument of injustice, or when criminal conduct cruelly injures an innocent victim?

For me this question is best answered by asking another: what should Britain have done about Nazi Germany? This is because the 1939-45 War was the greatest event in my childhood and youth. Although I was only a schoolboy at the time, I knew after Dunkirk that “the Germans” might be over in a week, and if they ever got ashore, there was nothing to stop them. I assumed, if they did, both my parents would be shot; and what would happen to me a boy of 10 years of age? Doing my best to see my country’s enemies in true proportion, Hitler in my judgement was an evil genius. The proper response to him was what Winston Churchill and his lieutenants in fact did: defy him, and fight for the survival of honour and decency at any price, rather than let the world sink into a new dark age “made more sinister by the light of perverted science”. And if Jesus Christ had come along and preached non-resistance and turning the other cheek, then for me he should have been ignored. Mercifully he did not; and the government of the day was spared the decision whether to lock him up, or worse. So what has Christ to say in time of war? Does he keep silent? Is his gospel only relevant when

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soldiers have restored a kind of peace? Is his gospel only relevant when Judges have learned again to sentence crime, and can say with justice that crime is no longer out of control? Is his Gospel only relevant for Arcadia and the Garden of Eden?

After five long frustrating years at the Bar, I learned that I too had to defeat evil, in the Law Courts; and not be defeated by evil. It is the same on the individual level, as on the grand scale. So I learned to master the skill of persuading witnesses whom I considered dishonest to tell stupid obvious lies in the witness-box, OF THEIR OWN FREEWILL, which of course destroyed their credibility. I learned it was not enough to have an honest case, because, as Pushkin might have said, the Courts much prefer a witness telling edifying lies to a witness telling irritating truths. I had to be able to submit that wherever truth lay, falsehood lay with the other side. When I could pull it off, it was the key to annihilating victory. Both the War and my professional experience have taught me that one must fight evil tooth and nail, even while one recognises that one may oneself be the vehicle of evil, for a time.

We no longer live in the simple world of Palestine within the Roman Empire in which Jesus lived; and the solutions for his day are not appropriate for ours. Being a practical man, I seek to identify the roots of evil by asking the question, "What should one do about evil?" For me, academic theories about the roots of evil are quite valueless, unless they tell us what one should do in practice.

However marvellous a person Jesus was, I am not prepared to abrogate my own sense of judgement of right and wrong, and of what the will of God is for me. Indeed if one tries to do the will of God, one generally ends up in my experience telling God what one thinks His will is, despite the obvious danger that one is, or may be, indulging in wishful thinking. To do anything else is to copy slavishly the plans of bygone masters, and force them to fit new situations, which is the road to catastrophe: certainly in this world, and I suspect in the next too. Even if the future of the entire world were to rest on the correctness of one's own

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judgement, one must still try to use that judgement, and not shelter behind rules of conduct set out 2000 years ago. One listens to ancient wisdom, but is not necessarily guided by it.

At the same time, I revere the past, and believe we should learn the lessons bygone heroes have to teach us. They were just as intelligent as we are, and perhaps wiser. Even a modest reading of history provides examples of those professing to be the guardians of holiness and truth becoming in time perpetrators of the basest evil. Those who administered the Inquisition were, in their own eyes, mostly scrupulous men; and I expect to start with they were, and may even have done some good. But by the end they told their most distinguished victim, Galileo, he must speak “the truth, or face torture”; in fact they meant “deny the truth of Copernicus or face torture”. The Court of Star Chamber began life as a wonderful instrument for reducing rebellious barons to order, to the great relief of the common people; by the end it was a fearsome instrument of oppression. No-one is safe. The dragon slayer can become himself the dragon without knowing it.

One must recognise that one cannot right every wrong; and it is best to limit oneself to goals within one’s capability. John the Baptist gave a good example; Cranmer’s Collect for him says he constantly spoke the truth, boldly rebuked vice, and patiently suffered for the truth’s sake. Full marks to anyone who can do as well as that!

Yet it was said that the least in the kingdom of Heaven was greater than he. So what more is one expected to do? In any group of people, can we all recognise the roots of evil in each other? Most law-abiding people have avoided the passionate love of money that Shylock had; most of us have had a bit of power, but not been badly corrupted by it; most enjoyed a sport, without turning it into an idolatry. So why cannot we build the kingdom of Heaven on earth? Why can we not trust each other completely: because we cannot, and in the present state of our society ought not to try? If you repose more trust in a friend than he is

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accustomed to give, you lose his friendship, in my experience. Why does evil come between people to prevent them trusting each other more? And how is it to be overcome?

The roots of evil are in ourselves. We cannot trust each other, because we know we ourselves are not wholly trustworthy; and it is wrong to claim to be more trustworthy than one is. It is safer, and probably wiser, to claim only that one will fulfil the expectations society has of us. It is foolish to claim more, and then fall flat on one's face. To do better than this, one has to transcend the requirements of society; break free from the conventions of life, however much one subscribes to them for the sake of decorum. And my experience is that most people find this virtually impossible for any length of time.

This is what the Church is groping towards, in its emphasis on sin: that we cannot by ourselves create a world without sin. We may try to create a welfare state; we may try to eliminate evils on a small scale. But if we try to create a society on a basis of kindness, mutual trust, forgiveness, and Christian charity, the result is abject failure. It is one thing to practice these things in one's daily life, or try to; it is quite another to try to run a society on this basis. King Arthur's Court at Camelot was a beautiful medieval dream that such a society might be possible; but the French added the chapter about the adultery of Queen Gwenevere and Sir Launcelot, which brought the whole kingdom crashing down in ruins. It was an addition that was true to life; it was a recognition that it was just a dream. It is impossible that society as we know it, should be a world without sin; when it is perfectly obvious that without a criminal law, the prosecution of offences, and their punishment, it would all disintegrate into chaos. There are some people who only understand the language of fear. And a world without sin must remain an other-worldly concept for a long time to come.

Jesus was right to say that his kingdom was not of this world; but we unfortunately have to live in this world. With the atomic bomb staring us all in the face, for those in power to abdicate, and those not in power to call for the abrogation of, the responsibility for this

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world's safety is not an honourable thing to do. The roots of evil may be in ourselves, but until someone by Divine grace creates absolute trust between people, we must just do the best we can. In my opinion that means that selfishness, sin, crime, violence, and war will remain endemic features of society into the foreseeable future. You might have thought that religion would make it easier for people to trust each other; and as this mutual trust grew, gradually it would blossom into perfect trust. You might have thought that religion would provide the way forward to a better society, if not to a world without sin. But it is not so. Maybe this is how things were meant to be; but it is not how they are. Church-going is not a catalyst for close friendship. Climbing friendships often last a lifetime, whereas church friendships do not. Friendships on the hills are much closer, I suppose. But then when you tie onto a climbing rope, you agree silently to see it through with the others, until you are safely back in the valley. There is no corresponding silent agreement among church-goers. They are just a motley collection who go to worship God, from a variety of differing motives. Some go for the splendour of Cranmer's prose; and it is the most majestic language, incomparably finer than any modern liturgy I have read. Some go to find an anchorage in life; and the clergy say, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and for ever". It sounds fine, until you realize that his teaching would have us capitulate to terror. Does the risen Christ change his opinions? Is he not quite as timeless as he used to be? Is he like a bed of seaweed on a lee shore: a place where no anchor will hold? Is it wise to look for certainty, when science only offers probabilities?

Mountaineers tend to see eternity in the hills. It is only a symbol; we all know that mountains weather. The Lake District fells were once 10,000 feet high; and even the Alps are old compared to the Himalaya. But they last much longer than a human life; so they can symbolise eternity. And many mountaineers find in climbing an approach to reality; a very good approach it is too. On the hills you silently agree to show courage, honour, truthfulness

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in your judgements of what is safe and what is not, and to risk and even sacrifice your life if circumstances turn adverse and demand it. If you are looking for the still point of the turning world, as the poet put it, you are more likely to find it in this loyalty, than in creeds and dogma. Just as you are more likely to find it in a sense of communion with the Risen Christ, provided you are confident this is not fantasy, than you are in church fellowship.

So if the roots of evil are in ourselves, and something new is needed to root out evil from ourselves, and enable at least a few people to trust each other completely, where does one look? Not much good looking at Church teaching; there is as little chance of reform from within, as there was in the days of Erasmus and Luther. Nor is it much good lamenting that the Church never developed a political philosophy, whereas Islam did from the first; which possibly is why Christian States went down like ninepins in the early days of Islam's aggressive conquest. The Church might have developed in a different way, and provided different solutions, but it didn't. What is needed is to remove from Church teaching the influence of Plato, whose philosophy we now know rests on a basis that modern science says is false. I gather that Dean Inge, the gloomy Dean of St.Pauls, said that this would split Christianity down the middle. I have read some of his Outspoken Essays; they are dated and orthodox, and offer no prospect of serious reform, even if they were "outspoken" in his day. So I hardly think one need be put off by his melancholy prophesies. I imagine that Thomas Aquinas wanted to displace Plato, when he championed Aristotle so enthusiastically; but it was beyond him. Plato was too entrenched. And indeed the Inquisition turned Aristotle, the great experimenter and prophet of experience, into the sacred text they used to condemn Galileo; such was the malign influence of Plato's "immortal truths". It may seem an unromantic solution to the Church's malaise; but unless an institution gets its thinking right, nothing else will prosper. And it is anyway only a first step.

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Quite simply, for two people to trust each other fully, each must be certain of the thoughts of the other; each must know the thoughts of the other. Which is telepathy.

This can only happen if the thoughts of each are in the mind of the other. No harm in expressing them too; but heard much more clearly than mere words, because it is the very thought of the other that one perceives in one's own mind. Much clearer than the inadequate expression of that thought in words, when we all know that there is always a chasm between the imagination and the expression. Psychiatrists might condemn it as "Spirit possession". Without wishing to appear contemptuous, it is something that lovers have always known about. Which is perhaps why Jesus told us to love our enemies.

So getting rid of the spirit of Plato is the first step, and being able to read each others thoughts is the last step; and in between we must strive to recover the spirit of the historical Jesus, who never in the Synoptic Gospels took refuge in theology. He always used parables. Only in John's Gospel do you get the theorizing; in the Prelude in Chapter 1, and in the Last Discourses which begin substantially in Chapter 14. The language is sublime and incredibly beautiful, the sentiment lofty and full of compassion, and they represent an attempt dimly to understand what it is all about. For many years, together with the Johannine Epistles, they were the part of the Bible I loved most; but their fatal flaw is that they lack enthusiasm for life. And this is the fatal legacy of Plato; ever so slowly he has destroyed the vitality of the Church. It was Augustine who introduced him; and it is time he left. Augustine served his apprenticeship in tortuous paths; in shameless immorality, in manichaeian belief which was not far removed from a hatred of life; and whose words in more mature life were used to justify the compulsion of conscience. Augustine wrote his best known book, *The City of God*, in an attempt to defend the Church after the sack of Rome by Alaric the Goth, for which the Christians were being blamed. And most of the earlier part of the book is concerned with denigrating Roman gods as evil spirits; it is only when he reaches Plato that he becomes

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eloquent. I prefer the attitude of Vice-Admiral Nelson, pondering whether to chase the French round the West Indies, or follow them back across the Atlantic; he said, "I'm not the Pope. I'm not infallible; but I make up my mind as best I can on the information available". And he made the correct decision, which ended in the annihilating victory at Trafalgar.

Those with a zest for life, or even a zest for death, will always overwhelm those who haven't either; Plato's Olympian calm has had its day. Augustine, attractive in many ways, was not infallible either; and Plato should leave. In effect I am proposing there should be stripped out of Christian doctrine the entire body of Neo-Platonist thought for which Augustine was responsible. Then we can all go back to St.Paul's letters; and start again this time using modern English, and studying what Jesus actually thought.