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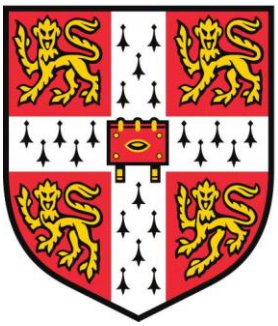

UNIVERSITY SERMON

The Hulsean Sermon:
'Mercy, Justice and Truth:
Picking a Path Through a Polarised World'

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The Hulsean Sermon originates in the will of John Hulse, of St John's College, who died in 1790, and is to be preached around 'The Truth and Excellence of Revealed Religion, or the Evidence of Christianity'.

The text we have heard today is one of a number of gospel stories in which the opponents of Jesus force on him a difficult, apparently impossible, choice. They put him in a bind so that he'll have to jump one way or the other, and whichever way he jumps, he is going to get into trouble. In this case, if Jesus advises against stoning the woman, he sets himself in opposition to the law. Leviticus and Deuteronomy do indeed, as his interlocutors remind him, call for adulterers to be put to death – the penalty applies to both parties in adultery, although here the male element seems puzzlingly airbrushed out of the story. So, then, is Jesus going to directly contradict the Law? But then consider the other option: if one could imagine him encouraging the stoning to proceed, he would also be in trouble—this would, his opponents must assume, shock and alienate his followers, all the people who had come to him early in the morning so that he could teach them.

As usual, Jesus refuses to be caught by the dilemma constructed by his adversaries. He doesn't take either option: he's elusive at first, and when he does respond, it is in a way that brings about a fundamental shift in the whole scene. But what is it exactly that shifts? It is not the generally accepted sexual code: Jesus' final words to the woman --'sin no more' -- make this clear. The passage doesn't question the prohibition on adultery, even if it is also not especially focused on it. Is it instead the balance between law and mercy, justice and forgiveness, which shifts? That might seem an obvious, familiar answer to reach for, but actually it cannot quite be that—forcing a choice between compassion and observance of the Law is precisely the challenge of the scribes and pharisees, precisely the thing that Jesus avoids doing, at least directly. The shift that Jesus most fundamentally brings about here is a shift in the direction of our attention, in which way we look to see the guilt in the situation, where the lens of judgment is pointed.

It's an important issue. One thing we lack, in our own very polarised world, is a good way to think about guilt and responsibility and about where it lies. There is a lot of guilt lurking, without our quite knowing how to discuss it or where to put it. Climate guilt, for instance. Many people I know are in some way living differently because of their awareness of ecological devastation and the climate emergency. A little differently. Print on both sides of the paper and compost your tea bags. Waste a bit less food and maybe change your diet. Reduce your driving, buy a different kind of car, fly less. Lots of people seem to do

something, to register their concern in some way—minor in some cases, more substantial in others-- but very few, I think, escape an awareness, on some level, that it is not enough, that they remain deeply enmeshed in a way of life that is unsustainable, damaging the earth, unfair to future generations.

Guilt also plays a significant role, I think, in many of our hot button topics, in debates around so-called cancel culture and wokeness, around white privilege and decolonising the curriculum. The *language* of guilt seems mostly used only by one side in these culture wars, and then only in order to dismiss it: people insist that they refuse to feel guilty for happening to be, let's say, white and male, or they mock so-called liberal guilt. On the other side, propounders of concepts of white privilege and decolonising the curriculum often don't explicitly speak of guilt; the discourse focuses instead on what needs to be seen and acknowledged (check your privileges), on the importance of recognition for certain social realities and the hearing of certain voices, on matters of understanding and awareness. This is even more the case when we move into the institutional space of EDI, of equality, diversity and inclusion: all the focus is on rather nice-sounding things, on blandly positive commitments and values and vision. But pay a little attention and you can see and feel the guilt which lurks, a layer or two beneath the surface. What is ultimately at issue, after all, are not small failures in etiquette and protocol, but deep societal evils, long-standing, humanity-attacking, death-dealing injustices. Why shouldn't there be guilt somewhere in the air? The fear of guilt makes itself felt in the vehemence of the anti-woke on the one side, and in the conformity and earnest rigidity which sometimes marks the other end of the spectrum. The guilt gathers itself together and lands on particular individuals at times, in a so-called cancellation. And I am inclined to think the guilt also expresses itself indirectly, bureaucratically, through the sheer weight of procedural innovation and new paperwork called into being by the EDI agenda.

There is a retelling of the story of Jesus in the temple and the woman caught in adultery where things don't end so well as in John's gospel. It's not a serious retelling—it's a Catholic joke, in fact—but it points us in a useful direction for thinking about guilt.

In this other version, all goes as before until Jesus says, 'let whoever is without sin throw the first stone'. Nothing happens for a moment, until a little old woman from the back of the crowd totters forward and just about manages to heave a small stone, and then

everyone's fury is unleashed and things go badly from there. At the end Jesus is left alone with the little old woman 'Aw, mum' he says 'why do you always have to go and spoil things for me?'.

I think of this as a particularly Catholic joke because it plays on the idea of the Immaculate Conception, the teaching, which became formal dogma in 1854, that Mary alone is untouched by original sin. What takes us in an interesting direction here is not so much the focus on Mary, though, but what lies behind it, the presumption of a concept of original sin. The joke implicitly reads the gospel story through the lens of the doctrine of original sin. And that, at least, is a reasonable thing to do. One couldn't, to be clear, build a whole doctrine of original sin out of this text alone, and the doctrine wasn't, in fact, established historically on this basis, but on a range of other Scriptural passages, and even more importantly, out of a wrestling with the theology of grace and the church's baptismal practice. But the text does nevertheless fit well with the doctrine of original sin—there is a being-in-the-wrong that is always already affecting everyone, so that there is no one who can, when called to consider their own situation, hold themselves innocent and throw the first stone.

Original sin is a teaching which, via St Augustine, strongly shaped Western Christianity, Protestant and Catholic alike. It's not, these days, an especially *popular* bit of the Christian theological inheritance, either within the churches or outside them. If much of our culture has grown tired of the Christian tradition, then this is a bit to which we are likely to be especially allergic. It's gloomy. It's irrational. Above all it's unfair. How can I be accountable, from birth; guilty, from birth; a sinner, from birth—for something done long before my birth, in the dim and distant past, or as a matter of fact in the non-existent and mythological past? How could that make sense? How could it possibly be just? Original sin is a very poor fit with the individualistic instincts which came to us in the Enlightenment and have remained with us since the Enlightenment.

But of course, something isn't working particularly well with these individualistic instincts we have inherited from the Enlightenment. There is a lot of guilt flowing around and we don't know how to think about it and we don't know where to put it, and it's my conviction that in trying to avoid or suppress or ignore it, we tend to make things worse. Perhaps there is something, then, that can be retrieved and made use of in this now so alien way of thinking, something that might help us. We have here, after all, a long tradition of

grappling with what it means for an individual to find themselves involved in an evil much greater than themselves, and whether we think about human degradation of the planet or about UK inequities around class or about the scourge of racism, we need to find a way to grapple with what it means for an individual to find themselves enmeshed in an evil much greater than themselves, responsible and not responsible in a way that is difficult to disentangle.

Christian theology in the last century has been groping towards a concept of social or structural sin, and this I think can be helpful here. It's been seen by some as an incursion of sociological, maybe Marxist thinking, into theology, a displacement of the vertical, heavenward focus religion ought to have. But to me it seems not so much an invasion of the secular into Christian thought, as the unfolding of an aspect of Christian thought which is in fact most at odds with secular instincts. Structural sin is not of course *identical* with original sin—however long and deep the reach of patterns like racism or rampant destructive capitalism, there is no reason to count them as universal to humanity. But these structures and social patterns are one of the ways in which the wrongness of things, the distortion and damage of the world we live in, is mediated to us, the way it affects and infects us. Sin is bigger than us, as individuals, but it is also in us. We find ourselves in the midst of a wrong that we didn't invent, that predates us, but that we are nevertheless caught up into, shaped by, made guilty by.

Surely not, you might think. Surely we cannot be made guilty by something that is not of our doing, something that predates us. We have I think a moral intuition, a moral instinct, that this cannot be right. And yet that we are made guilty—made sinners, to use the traditional language—by something before and beyond us actually seems to fit the situation we find ourselves in rather better than that first instinct for fairness. Consider, to take just one example, the situation in relation to the destruction of the planet. We are born into a society and an economic system which has already gone wrong, whose prosperity is already structured around consuming more than our share of nature's gifts, a way of going about business which demands more than the planet can sustain. We benefit, most of us, to one degree or another, by being part of a system that has built its prosperity—however shaky that may seem at the moment-- in this way. The costs of climate change, we all know, are borne disproportionately by the poorest countries. We did not choose this injustice, this wrongdoing towards other species, and towards people in distant lands, and towards future

generations, but we are in the midst of it, participating in it by participating in the life of our society, benefitting from it insofar as we are carried along by that life. And more than that, this system which is objectively wrong, which is contributing to the destruction of the future, is also shaping us, our habits desires and judgments, actively turning us into people inclined to live in ways which make things worse, just as racism, or sexism, or the class system, find their way inside us without our permission and incline us to get things wrong.

It sounds heavy, perhaps, a little too heavy for what surely ought to be an uplifting sermon on a Sunday morning. Yet it shouldn't. Those who go to church will routinely be declaring themselves, sinners, every Sunday morning and perhaps even some of the days in between. We don't pray for forgiveness only on condition that we happened to remember doing some particular nasty thing the week before. It is something more basic than that. The understanding of ourselves as-- all of us –sinners, is programmed into the liturgy; it is woven into the Christian pattern of faith. Pope Francis greeted his election to the papacy with the statement 'I am a sinner, but I trust in the infinite mercy and patience of our Lord Jesus Christ', and this is absolutely what can be said by all Christians. Grace and mercy are at the centre of Christianity, of course, as is hope, but grace, mercy and hope are experienced not away from and apart from our place as sinners, but together with this, in the midst of it.

Let me return to the passage with Jesus and those who would stone the woman caught in adultery. A Jewish friend gave me a fascinating reading of contemporary cancel culture in relation to this story. These days, people do not, she said, throw stones *because* they are without sin; they throw stones *in order to be* without sin. The need to be without sin, the need to be innocent, can distort us in various ways, whether by leading us to a politics of purity, of condemning and ostracising others, or through the defensive, sanctimonious refusal to acknowledge any complicity in evil. It is in the nature of sin to blind us—the injustices of the world tend to be much more clear to those who suffer them—and sin unacknowledged, a guilt which cannot be considered, blinds us all the more.

I think there is a quiet sort of hope available precisely from the possibility of recognising ourselves as guilty, as made sinful in varying ways by situations which are bigger than ourselves, and in which we find ourselves. We don't have to waste effort and psychic energy in exculpation and moral self-defence, because we already know we will never cease to depend on the grace and mercy of a forgiving God. And if the anxious search for our own innocence is not our focus, there will perhaps be a little less need to throw stones at those

who have been publicly caught, on camera or in print, in the very act of doing something wrong, like the woman in the gospel. If we can accept the fact of our multiple entanglements in guilt, we can live a little more truthfully, more willing to see the reality about the world of which we are a part and its deep injustices, more willing to hear the voices of those who best understand these injustices because they most suffer under them.

Christianity is all about conversion, metanoia, change. And so of course the response to this finding ourselves in the wrong is also always a matter of seeking conversion, change of heart and mind, change in the way we live and change in the institutions around us. But conversion is not a one-off switch, a sudden shift from being on the side of the baddies to being a good guy. It's a life-long process that can take many forms, all imperfect and incomplete in their own way. It's a process that requires among other things patience.

How can we be patient, how can we live with a sense of guilt, of being caught up with a wrongness that we hate but that we can't simply escape? It requires a constant renewing in our trust in the God who is greater than any guilt. The promise of the Gospel is that however entangled we are in sin, we are always all the more surrounded by the grace of the Lord; that though we may feel trapped in a situation that is wrong, there are always paths along which the Spirit beckons us, individually and collectively, forward; and that though we may live in darkening times, the One who made the world out of nothing can and does bring forth new light in ways beyond our imagining.

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