

#791 Sin, Sight, and a Vision of God

Colleagues,

Two months ago today I was at a Lutheran church in Cape Town testing the patience of delegates to an assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in South Africa (Cape). I hope one of these Thursdays to tell you a little about that adventure and the saints I encountered in the course of it. For now I mention merely that I'd been asked to fill an entire morning with an exploration of the topic, "The Vision of God for the Church." So that's what I did. All present survived the experience. Today we send you a snippet of what they listened to.

Why this snippet and not another? Because it digs for the matter that's finally at issue when people start talking about vision, and about God's vision in particular. We of the Crossings crowd go looking for this sort of thing as a matter of course. Not that it makes for pleasant viewing. Still, how else does one come to revel in the vision of visions that St. Paul calls "the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6)?

May the musings here help to nudge you once again in the direction of that revelry.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

From "God's Two Great Visions for the Visually Impaired," Part One of a two-part presentation on the theme, "The Vision of God for the Church"—

Let's dig into this theme in earnest by starting at the start, in a place called Eden, or in whatever room your mother happened to be when, with much pain and suffering, she squeezed you into the world.

The story of Eden, after all, is a story about all of us. It gives the deep and true account not so much of who we are, but of how we are as human beings in the world, and it helps us to understand why this is so.

I observe in passing that people who fail to see themselves inside the Eden story are delusional in the extreme. Either that, or they've never taken the trouble to listen properly to the story in all its terse and dreadful detail.

The Church is of little help to such people, by the way, when it relies too heavily on its in-house jargon in discussions of the story. We pepper such discussions with the word "sin" and we confuse things all the more when we doctor it up with the adjective "original." In America these days the word "sin" is in disrepute. It's considered bad form to use it in public. The phrase "original sin" is simply mystifying. Christians themselves are hard-pressed to agree on what it means, let alone on whether it provides an appropriate account of the human condition. Baptists say no, of course, and in America's churches, at least, the Baptist view prevails. I think there's a certain wistfulness involved here, a kind of dreaming that drips with longing, dreaming itself being a form of vision. One looks at the newborn babe, and one sees, or rather, one aches to see a blank tablet on which nothing has yet been written. This leaves open the possibility that whatever might be recorded there in the future will be in all respects a good record, gentle, strong, courageous, accomplished, perfectly pleasing to each and every eye, God's eye included. The term "original sin" assaults that dream. To call the baby a sinner is like pouring black ink

on a fresh piece of exquisite paper, and who wants to do that? At the very least it seems rude.

Oddly, no one seems to bat an eye when scientists observe that every newborn is in significant measure a prisoner of its genetic code; and it is simple common sense to expect that every person is shaped and limited even before birth by the family and circumstances into which the mother will bear it; and this is so even in societies in which class is not so great an issue as it is in others.

We Christians would do well to recognize how the word “sin” also describes realities that every thinking person can admit to without much effort. In other words, sin too is a matter of common sense, if only we’d take the time to describe what it points to. As I mentioned, the word itself has long since been rendered useless outside our own circles by an irrational prejudice; though even within our own circles the prejudice grows. That’s my view, at any rate; and I toss it out the only way I can, as a sinner doing what sinners do in the company of other sinners. I state my view. *My* view. That’s what sin is fundamentally about, each person risking his own view in possible or even likely competition with the views of others, and with the view of God in particular.

As it happens, that’s the first thing the Eden story describes when it rolls up its sleeves and moves from the preamble of Genesis 2 into the nut of the matter in Genesis 3. You know how it goes, of course, though perhaps a bit of emphasis will help to make it even clearer:

“When the woman *saw* that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise”—or to open the *inner* eye, as one might say; then “she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to

her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then"—notice—"the eyes of both were *opened*, and they knew that they were naked" (Gen. 3:6-7). Here the irony scorches like acid. As if the silly fig leaves they scramble for will be an improvement on the glorious skins that God has seen fit to robe them in, skins that prior to their eating they have quite enjoyed seeing and being seen in; as if the prior enjoyment was merely a consequence of defective eyesight, now suddenly made better.

In fact the seeing is worse; and what the story describes at this point is the corruption of human vision, a scrambling of the eyes. Prior to the eating, each has seen as the other saw, and both have seen as God sees. Now she sees for herself, as we say, and he for himself. Or, again as we say, each has his or her distinct point of view; and as every husband/wife team I have ever known will testify, they will quickly feel this as an affliction, a thing sometimes to joke about, gently, one hopes, but at other times to bear with gritted teeth.

Again the acidic irony: their eyes were opened; they knew that they were naked, as if that were somehow a mark of progress. Instead it's a regression, or, as the Church has always said, a fall. This new knowing has quite destroyed a former knowing. Each used to know how the other saw things. Each took it for granted that the other was looking on him or her with unmitigated joy. Suddenly neither is so sure about this anymore. Hence the compelling need to cover up those parts most likely to put a glint in the other's eye, and for all one knows, an evil glint, though how can one be certain? Still, better safe than sorry; so please, dear, pass the fig leaf just in case. And with that—a key point—the two make it plain that they are strangers to each other in a way they hadn't been before.

It's about to get worse. Much worse. Enter God, coming for the

evening stroll and the spot of chitchat, and the two go into hiding (Gen. 3:8). They take it for granted that God will not like what God is now obliged to see, and so they hide from his eyes. Every ten year old boy knows exactly what this is about. With only the slightest prompting he'll recall, for example, how mother had seen that it was not good for balls to be tossed around inside the house and had said so very clearly, yet on that particular afternoon he and his friend saw this instead as a delightful thing to do. (From a mother's point of view, boys are surpassingly strange creatures, are they not?) In any case, within a matter of minutes Mum's favorite lamp, the family heirloom, lay broken on the floor; and at the sound of the car in the driveway the lad went into hiding. He had to. He couldn't help it. He had no choice. His will was enslaved, as Luther would say, held captive by his dread. He feared the look of wrath and disappointment in his mother's eyes, and even more he feared what she would say now. He spent the next many hours, the next few days, perhaps, estranged from his mother. He flinches to this day whenever he recalls the bitterness of it.

In the story Adam gets summoned out of hiding as every Adam always does, or at some point will. In the conversation that follows it becomes immediately obvious that his vision is badly damaged. He does not and cannot perceive the present situation in the same way God does. Notice how God's tone with Adam is firm, yet gentle. It begs for honest confession. "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree?" (Gen. 3:11) As if God doesn't know. This is God seeing an errant son on whom his heart is fixed. If only the son would use his eyes to see a gracious father, brimming over with mercy and compassion. He doesn't. He cannot. Instead he responds like a cornered dog. Listen to him snarl: "The woman *you* gave me..." (Gen. 3:12).

No wonder God responds as God does, by speaking for the first time in an unconditioned future tense, no ifs, ands, or buts

restraining it in any way: "Dust you are; to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19). Here in eight terse words, five in Hebrew, is the first great vision of God for every Adam's future, and it is dreadful. Every Adam or Eve I have ever bumped into resents it bitterly. That includes the Adam who stares at me from a mirror every morning. God tells us what he sees, and now that our own vision is badly skewed we regard this as arbitrary and punitive. In fact it's mostly descriptive. Well, of course it is. If you fill up a world with people, each committed to seeing things in his or her own way, each unable or unwilling to see things as others see them, then you can guarantee a time to come when these people will start to kill each other, a point the Cain and Abel story underscores; and now and then the slaughter will be immense. In the meantime they will cluster for safety and security's sake in groups, never altogether happy groups, each of them rife with quarrels and dissensions about what to do and who gets to do it, but even so, as groups they will stand in opposition to other groups in an endless contest to determine who gets whose way at whose expense; and some will lose; and because of this, God whose mercy encompasses not some but all his children, ensures that all will lose. Again, "dust you all are, and to dust you shall return with no exception." Let's call this what it is, a matter of simple justice. I die because it isn't fair for the rich American to live forever, not when he buys cheap clothes at the expense of Bangladeshi women he does not know or care about, women ground down and killed by greedy owners who see it as somehow good to pack them by the thousands into unsafe buildings. Isn't this the very thing that the first vision of God encompasses?

In any case, God guarantees this vision by driving the man and the woman away from the garden, away from the tree of life; and that's how this story ends, by laying out the reality into which every human child is always born. And yes, a dreadful, bitter

business it is, if not always from our point of view, then certainly from God's. This is not what he had in view when once he looked at the world that he had made and called it "very good."

To sum this up, come again with me to a hospital room in Cleveland, Ohio, or to a shack in a Cape Town slum, for that matter. Here sits a mother, exhausted yet radiantly happy, and in her arms the newborn, already suckling at her breast. She looks adoringly at the child; she dreams her dreams. You don't dare say this out loud—the mother will hate you for it, the nurse or midwife will slash at you with her eyes—yet here is the truth. This baby was born with defective vision, flawed eyesight. He cannot see as God sees; he will never see as those around him see, not exactly, that is, never precisely. He too is bound to insist, like every other human being ever born, on seeing for himself; and because this is so he will always be in some respect a stranger even to those to those who know and love him best. Of course the great mass of the human race will see and know him not, nor will it care to. He in turn will merrily return that favor. Meanwhile his life, like every other human life, will be an ongoing quarrel with God. Because of all this, even now, already now, his future contains a moment when his eyesight must fail once and for all; and from that moment there is simply no escape, none, that is, that he or any other human being, save one, can hope to conjure up.

This is what it means to say of this child that he—or she—is born a sinner. A sinner by origin. And it's for her sake—for his sake—that God saw fit in the fullness of time to create a thing called Church.