

Forgiveness

When I was a young Local Preacher I, like others on the same course, was required to read the published sermons of John Wesley. I enjoyed both the theology and the eighteenth-century language, both of which marked me out as a bit weird.

Wesley's notion of Salvation was very orthodox and typical of the Evangelical Revival: a strong sense of personal guilt and responsibility for sin, and an equally strong sense that this sense of guilt was, in some way, 'dealt with' through the sacrificial death of Christ. The resulting sense of being forgiven, and liberation from an intolerable burden lay at the heart of Wesley's doctrine of Salvation. John preached about this liberation; his brother Charles wrote countless hymns about it.

There are of course real difficulties with the guilt-and-forgiveness story: there's a real temptation to try to persuade people that they ought to feel guilty, because if they never feel that bad about themselves they can never know the exhilarating sense of liberation. It may all be done for best of motives, but is it right to make people feel guilty when they have done nothing out of the ordinary to feel guilty about? Since Wesley's day the Christian church has made a considerable industry out of making people feel guilty ... so they could be saved from guilt. Much misery has resulted from this misguided strategy.

There are also many people who struggle daily with the conviction that they are responsible for having caused harm to someone else. A case in point is the young Australian bowler whose short delivery struck his colleague's head at a point where his helmet offered no protection. The batsman collapsed and died; it may take a long time for the bowler to come to terms with what happened. People can suffer years of anguish because they are inflicting upon themselves a sense of guilt – for which in many cases there is no reason.

I remember a church (nowhere near Reading) which was undertaking an exciting refurbishment scheme. One lady in the congregation was leading, driving, facilitating the changes. Everyone was delighted ... until the main contractor did something wrong. From that moment the organiser was made to feel guilty, even though she herself had done everything exactly by the book.

That is not to say that all guilty feelings are to be dismissed. Some people have done dreadful things to other people. When they realise the enormity of what they have done they do feel guilty and ashamed, and need help to find release from that burden, including making amends, perhaps accepting punishment, and learning to accept themselves as flawed human beings. And above all to amend themselves.

But most of us are not, in that sense, guilty, nor are we plagued by feelings of guilt because someone well-meaning thinks we should. How can we make sense of this complex subject?

Over the years I have begun to wonder, therefore, whether that Wesleyan way of looking at Salvation might not need revisiting. Don't get me wrong – everything that the Wesley brothers taught and wrote rings perfectly true, but with this qualification. Does it tell the whole story? Does it ring bells for the modern person? With some, certainly, but for others, including me, it raises problems not because it's wrong or misleading but because (to use a very modern sort of phrase) it requires us to scratch where we don't itch. The contemporary sense of unease arises for many reasons other than personal feelings of guilt. One great theologian of the twentieth century described it as 'estrangement', a feeling of not quite fitting in, not feeling comfortably at home.

For me, that seems to work. We are out-of-kilter with the world, and that needs to be put right.

Depending, then, on our circumstances, Salvation presents itself to us as release from guilt, through the Cross of Christ, or as liberation from a sense of guilt imposed on us by someone else, or as freedom from a sense of estrangement, of not belonging. The ministry of reconciliation of which St Paul wrote, is about having the patience to listen as people wrestle with whatever form this disquiet may take. The heart of the church's message is that in Christ everyone can experience liberation and find wholeness – shalom. You and I, as disciples of Christ, have no other message to share.