

Moral Pressure

Ash Wednesday – 14th February 2024

John 8:1-11

While Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery.

Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?' They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground.

When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, sir.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.'

<Prayer>

God has made us to have a great awareness of time. In any endeavour, great or small, we have our Homo-Sapien's brain to consider the present and predict into the future from our experiences of the past. For humanity, loops of progress are possible: cycles of things getting better and better, and mistakes hopefully less. **Yet it's this passage of time, when overlaid onto the behaviour of individuals or society, that brings us towards *moral pressure*.** What on Earth do I mean by that – moral pressure?

We creatures of higher thought can instinctively know when something is wrong in our behaviour – be that by mistake, as when we might touch something hot, or by conscience when we lie, cheat or steal. When such knowledge is overlaid onto time, the result is a sense of tested integrity because we can know what virtues are required of us as we approach future decisions. Of even greater magnitude is the piling-up of past human experience, with its many examples of past failure. We must face the inconvenient truth that for the most part it seems we have no reasonable excuses for anything other than perfect behaviour in all things, because we have our experience of the past, and our self-control of the moment. **Time and experience bring moral pressure to always do things right.**

The realisation of things being wrong, things we and others have done wrong, can often be felt very keenly. **Words such as conscience, guilt and shame are possible because we cannot set aside the knowledge of right and wrong, which we have accumulated over time.** We literally cannot forget. This is a legacy of the Fall, thanks to the fruit of Adam and Eve. Ever since that moment in Eden we know that we shall fall again, now and in the future. Most horribly we are aware of when we do so in the moment, and do so anyway, being unable to help ourselves.

So, by the passage of time we can know our failures, and because of our conscience we can feel our failures, and because of our collective human frailty we can lament our inability to address our failures. **It's a horrible closed loop of failure running through time, with the resolve that we want to get out of it, but realising we can't.** What diabolical design has left us with such opportunity to be so sinful, whilst at the same time such weak of conscience?

We find ourselves searching with more pressure for hope of change, or even just comfort. But where to search? Usually, we look to justice, power, science and charity to help us control failure or even avoid our conflicted moral selves. Let me examine some of these places to look, for a moment.

Justice, law and policy let us so tightly define failure that it is easily exposed and addressed. We want collective protection from our own collective failures, so we work together in respect for justice, hoping that its exposure will have a preventative, or at least a containing effect.

Sports let us play-out the contests of failure and victory in a safe zone, where incarnations of ourselves stand in for us. From chess to rugby, we can have a controlled conflict where there can be usually a result – except for Cricket!

Or in the *arts*, where we expose our feelings of conscience into abstractions that caricature or personify great complexities of emotion. Art seems to allow our failures to be safely let out of us and captured as if frozen. We can then gaze upon them like mirrors.

Charity – lets us build positive moral capital by reacting to the conscience, guilt and shame we sometimes feel. Caring for others is so often also caring for oneself, when hope seems scares. Indeed, charity seems to give a positive value, and amplifies our inherent responsibility towards others.

So justice, sports, the arts and charity are all good things, and very necessary for each person and society as a whole. We could add education, science and technology as further places for hope that we have created for ourselves. **Indeed, we might even go as far as to say that these are all available to us to place our *faith* in.** But these are all coping mechanisms, valves for the moral pressure, not places for faith.

Now we are getting close to the meaning of Ash Wednesday. As Christians the moral pressure is even worse, because we are not only addressing some natural feelings of conscience, but an even greater knowledge of our sinful lives before God. Believe me, no one does guilt like the faithful! **By the Cross of Christ, we can, by faith, face our corrupted selves and take the steps of repentance and confession, leading to forgiveness, grace and hope.** Nothing else quite matches that. And by the way, you can do that anywhere and at any time. Your time, your sin, your repentance, your hope.

But there is another important dimension. What of our collective sin and failure together?

As a society, global, national and local, we have some other pretty big moral pressures to release, but that is not so easy to do. These are things we seem quite unable to address together, but neither can we carry alone. Impossible situations abound, such as conflict, migration, carbon and dementia. Some of these impossible situations are not just the bad things humanity does, but the collective failure to do the good things, or find common solutions.

How does the cross, and the personal sacrifice of one man, Jesus Christ, help in such a compound and multifarious mess? At all stages of the passion story – the laying down of palms, the gathering in the temple, the Last Supper, Gethsemane, arrest, trial, crucifixion and resurrection. In every single one of these familiar scenes there is a crowd, large or small. The dynamics of the many, be they baying or weeping are all around the cross.

Whatever happens when people get together, in collective responsibility and irresponsibility, the place of repentance and confession, leading to forgiveness, grace and hope are all amplified.

In these next weeks, Justin and I will attempt to draw together something of these impossible situations around the cross, but mark carefully these words, we are not into pious sounding solutions. The cross does not take away our sinful nature, individually or collectively. It helps us to deal with it, to release some of the pressure.

Amen