

Comment

Easter is here: the end of winter, the conquest of death, the end of 'the reign of death in our mortal bodies', the overthrow of 'the law of sin and death'—two pauline phrases both, incidentally, quoted in that curial and curious *Declaration* on sexual ethics. They are phrases that trip lightly off the tongue of the preacher but they may bear more careful scrutiny by the congregation. They represent, for one thing, an attempt to treat morals in terms of politics. It is the *reign* of sin that has to be ended, the *law* of sin and death that has to be dismantled. If we pause over the metaphor at all, we are inclined to imagine a battle in which the power of sin or satan is beaten by the stronger power of God. Christ, filled with the power of the Spirit, vanquishes the tyranny of the devil.

As a matter of fact, though, the image is more complicated and more interesting and it is of more than literary interest since this struggle which was in one sense won on calvary also has to be re-enacted in our lives. Not only during Lent and Easter but throughout our lives we are engaged in the struggle against 'the reign of sin in our mortal bodies'. What kind of struggle is it, and how shall we best tackle it?

In the first place it is not a matter of a king being defeated by a more powerful king. It is true that Jesus described Beelzeebub as a strong man armed guarding his estate who is dispossessed by one stronger than he, but the general tenor of the New Testament tells a more elaborate story. It is the defeat of a powerful tyrant by a force at least ostensibly much weaker. Certainly from the point of view of the tyrant the opposition looks absurdly ineffective and the issue seems to be in no doubt. It is not a case of a rescuing god storming into the world and wresting us from the grip of satan. The threat to satan's rule is posed by a man who consciously renounces the tyrant's weapons of fear and coercion, a man who deliberately makes himself vulnerable. Of course in the end he wins and so is, by definition, more powerful, but his power is of a new and unexpected kind, a power that looks just like weakness.

The pauline image, in fact, is not one of a battlefield but of *subversion*. The struggle of Christ, and our moral struggle, is a revolutionary activity directed not simply at the replacement of one ruler by another more powerful (but more benign) one, but at the destruction of a whole system, a complete transformation of structures, so that after the victory the very meaning of being a ruler has changed.

Victory in this struggle does not mean that we cease to take orders from satan and take them from Christ instead; it is a liberation.

Structures are so changed that we cease to take orders at all in the old sense. To pursue the metaphor, it is our dispositions, good or bad, that correspond to the social structures with which revolution is concerned. The moral struggle is not simply a matter of individual acts but of virtues and vices which are nothing but structures of human behaviour. It is an attempt to replace alienating oppressive structures (vices) by structures of liberation (virtues), media in which we can express our true selves and the divinity or grace within us.

Now despite what some pseudo-radicals believe, revolutions are not carried out by direct confrontation with the ruling class on its own terms (*e.g.* by terrorism), using inevitably feebler versions of the oppressor's own weapons, but mostly by pressing for reforms which the regime has to pretend to believe in but which it cannot in fact accommodate. For example the demand for full employment can be revolutionary under capitalism because, despite the fact that the liberal ideology of capitalism is supposed to approve of it, it cannot be achieved within capitalist structures except briefly under boom conditions. The reformer who is merely concerned to improve the current system will characteristically back down once it becomes apparent that his reforms are a real threat to basic structures; the revolutionary will carry on to the point where these structures have to be themselves transformed. We should note, too, that unlike the reformer he is not in any case aiming for full employment merely in the sense that it can temporarily be achieved under capitalism; he is seeking a structural change that will deepen and change the very meaning of work and human creativity. That is why he presses for more jobs even though he recognises that employment in its present form means exploitation.

Now the *Declaration*, like so many statements from moralists, is pseudo-radical. It seeks to confront the imperatives of the world and the flesh with opposing—but inevitably feebler—imperatives of its own. If we seriously wish to transform our moral world we should be pressing for just those reforms that the world and the flesh must pretend to believe in but which their structures (our distorted dispositions) cannot in fact accommodate. And principal amongst these is the demand for love.

The attempt to love, in actual praxis not just in romantic posturing, will threaten our alienating structures of vice, and provided that we do not back down when we see that what it is all leading to is a radical change, *metanoia*, conversion, these dispositions will collapse, we shall suffer a death and resurrection to new liberated structures, more deeply human and more divine. It is not at all that 'All you need is love'—this is as false as the view that all you need is full employment or peace or civil rights. It is not that the accompaniment of love will justify us in our distorted behaviour. Love justifies nothing; it transforms us instead. And when the transformation has taken place the very meaning of love itself will have changed and deepened, from a stumbling attempt at human friendship to the love which is the Holy Spirit.

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