

It is hard for us to understand the attitude of the ancient world towards slavery. Violence and cruelty we know extremely well, but what baffles us is that a whole class of what were evidently people could calmly be regarded as less than human. Intelligent and humane men seem to have had a blind spot about the rights of slaves; even some of the New Testament writers, who were well aware that they were challenging the fundamental values of their age, seem curiously indifferent to this evil. It is remarkably easy to leave people out of the human race; when we have stopped being amazed at the irrationality of our ancestors we could usefully search for parallels in our own time. There is, of course, racialism, there is the torture of political prisoners in, say, Brazil or our own country, there is also the treatment of ordinary criminals and of mental patients. In all these cases the point lies not in the ill-treatment but in the acceptance that for this class of people wholly different standards apply.

I think, though, that in a thousand years time, when men look back on the twentieth century, the thing they will find hardest to understand will be our attitude to unborn children; by what extraordinary mental gymnastic, they will ask, could we write them out of the human race? We find it shocking that St Paul should merely seek to ameliorate the conditions of slavery while remaining apparently untroubled by the institution itself. Our descendants will surely find it equally scandalous that there are twentieth-century Christians who accept the inevitability of abortion and merely 'try to make the Act work'. The Romans seem to have believed that their society simply would not work without slavery, and, given their technology, they may have had some justification. It is a good deal harder to show that our society depends on abortion—or if it does, this is surely a strong argument for revolution.

It is, of course, true that if an evil cannot immediately be abolished, it is worth while trying to mitigate it. An ultimately radical position does not exclude interim reformist measures. As St Thomas Aquinas pointed out, not everything that is evil should be forbidden by law; it may do more good simply to restrict and regulate an anti-social activity than to create confusion and conflict by banning it altogether. Until we have created the kind of society in which people will no longer turn so readily to abortion, it is clearly a good thing to regulate the practice. One good effect might be expected to be that those who distractedly believe an abortion is necessary could be brought into contact with people who are not simply looking for a fee but are concerned to help, people who may be able to suggest other possibilities.

It is by now notorious that such has not been the effect of legalizing abortion. At the moment we deliberately kill over two thousand

people a week with the excuse that they have not yet left the womb, and, as one investigator in the *Guardian* put it, 'removal of a foetus has become an extension of birth control in an upsettingly high number of cases'. There are a whole lot of ways of dealing with this situation, ranging from tightening the law to making less lethal forms of birth control more easily available. (Even those who believe that the use of contraceptives is always wrong will surely think this a lesser evil than crushing the life out of a child in the womb.) But the key factor remains our attitude to the unborn child: do we accord him human status or not?

We are confronted here by a kind of new Manichaeism which would condemn him as merely bodily, a view that evaluates the human only in terms of mental activities and which allows full membership of the human race only to those who are thought to communicate and to learn, who have entered in some way into our cultural relationships. Against this we need to reassert the old Christian materialism and the fundamental importance of the human body. There is no need to split scholastic hairs about the 'moment' at which this becomes true, but if there is human life in what leaves the womb then it was human life that it had before. Where there can be honest doubt about this, let there be honest doubt about abortion, but in a vast range of cases there can be no such uncertainty.

It may seem bizarre to bring so squalid a subject as abortion into relationship with the joy of Easter, but the season when we celebrate the bodily resurrection of Christ does seem an appropriate time to reaffirm our faith in the significance of the body. We do not proclaim just that the idea of Jesus lived on after his death in the hearts and minds of his disciples, we announce that Jesus, this living human organism, who was born of Mary and who died on the cross, is himself alive—admittedly with a transformed bodily life, but nonetheless his own bodily life. It is his body, and not just the thought of his body, that is sacramentally available to us in the eucharist. There are, of course, Christians for whom the body of Christ is unimportant, who cheerfully dismiss the relevance of the empty tomb to the resurrection. For them the identity of Christ is somehow independent of his body; it seems legitimate to detect here another aspect of this same Manichaeism. For the central Christian tradition, however, what is human is what belongs to the human body and our value, whether we be still in the womb or not, whether we be brilliantly creative or helplessly autistic, is rooted in the fact that these bodies are destined to share with Christ in the resurrection and in eternal life.

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