

Missional Eschatology Before Breakfast

There are these words:



*Fearless warriors in a picket fence,
reckless abandon wrapped in common sense
Deep water faith in the shallow end
and we are caught in the middle
With eyes wide open to the differences,
the God we want and the God who is
But will we trade our dreams for His
or are we caught in the middle?*

*Somewhere between my heart and my hands,
Somewhere between my faith and my plans,
Somewhere between the safety of the boat and the crashing
waves...*

That things are both “now and not yet” is a fundamental part of Christian spirituality.

It locates us in history: The Kingdom of God is **now**, for Christ is Risen! The Kingdom of God is **not yet**, for we look ahead to when Christ brings renewal and rightness to the groaning of all creation. We are “in the middle” in the opportunity to share in God’s loving purposes, his *mission*. We are not too early nor too late to the dynamic plans of God. This is what *eschatology* and talk about the end of all things means for the Christian.

It locates us in ourselves: “**Now** we are children of God,

but what we will be has **not yet** been made known.” (1 John 3:2). In the middle, we “work out our salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and act in order to fulfill his good purpose.” (Phil 2:12-13). We know now, whose we are, for certain. But we are incomplete, and we must have growth, refinement, maturation, strengthening.

“Now and not yet” therefore both *grounds us* and *stretches us*.

- We delight in what we have, but holy discontent with ourselves and the world spurs us on.
- We rejoice in where we have come to, but plans and ambitions must be abandoned as shallow and small as God’s perspective invades.
- We have the peace of present rest, but the constant call makes us face our fears and turn away from the control and comfort that would placate them: “Your journey is not yet done, continue, walk this way with me.”

The opposite of “now and not yet” is terrible. It’s “this is all there ever was, and it’s all there ever will be.” In such things we are both rootless and directionless, simply adrift. Rather, lead me through the tensions and pains of the now and not yet, so that, being alive, I may live!

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Immanent Divinity on the

Coffee Corner

Faith is both affective and cognitive.

Which is to say that we not only know about God, but we know him and are known by him. He *moves* us. He is close. He is immanent. Even (and especially) at those times when we are simply drinking coffee in the morning.



I need to remember this. Because often I need to be moved, changed, shifted in perspective and focus – away from my own navel, and the things that would bind, and towards the God of love. And then I can move, and bless, and do those life-giving things. Because of him.

When you move, you move all our fears

When you move, you move us to tears...

Because when you speak, when you move.

When you do what only you can do

It changes us, it changes what we see and what we seek

Sin

Two conversations have had me thinking about sin. Or to be more specific, what happens when we use the word “sin.” What actually gets communicated?

The first conversation was a wonderfully deep intelligent conversation in which I and my interlocutor were seeking mutual understanding on a whole swathe of issues. The relevant part involved a hypothetical where I was asked, "How would I speak to someone in situation X?" My response was, "I suppose I'd probably begin by saying 'Well, we are all sinners.'" The response to this was some genuine, well-hearted, dismay... "Oh yes, that's where you lot start from..."

What I intended in my response to the hypothetical was an attitude that eschewed holier-than-thou-ness or condemnation.

For my part, "We are all sinners" is the great leveller. It says "I am not better than you" and "I cannot condemn you, for if I did I would also condemn myself."

It's not like this was beyond the capacity of my conversationalist to understand. The conversation delved into areas of a relevant common human experience: how we all wrestle with both the broken parts and healthy parts of our lives; how even the most well-intentioned relationships cannot hold selfishness at bay 100% of the time; how in our finitude (if nothing else) we each end up committing and suffering harm. This is simple reality that we both recognised.

But somehow the word "sin" or "sinner" didn't connote any of that...

The second conversation was with someone who has a Christian faith but lives in a non-Christian context. She shared the evisceral reaction to the word, because that reaction has been part of her world: "'Sin' doesn't work, it get's turned off and tuned out."

But, it was noted, there are words that do work. "Brokenness" is one of them. Everyone of us can acknowledge that we are broken. "Darkness" is another, recognising the fact that sometimes we just want what we want, we do what we know is harmful and wrong. Even the phrase "rebellion against the

things of life” gets more traction.

The conclusion of course, is not a new thought: The word “sin” doesn’t work as a word anymore. It doesn’t do what words should do – encapsulate and communicate meaning. It’s Christian jargon. But it’s worse than that, from this perspective **it signifies our self-justifying delusion, “sin” is our construct to justify our own existence and exercise power over others.**



This is not hard to understand, but it something we need to emotionally appropriate. An exercise for (the much caricatured) Christian conservatives might be something like this: You know how we feel when we get called bigots and hatemongers? We not only find it derogatory and disconnected from the reality of who we are, and hypocritically hateful, we also consider it as polemical self-justification: if they can maintain the rage against the bigoted Christians, they can get more votes. You know how that makes us feel? On the flip-side, for them, that’s what happens when we use the word “sin.”

So what do we do about it? Do we stop using the word? Perhaps. After all, our job is to communicate, and it’s not like the word is sacrosanct. Are we not preachers, homileticians? Our job is to connect the worlds and get the meaning across. Just as I don’t quickly use jargon words like “eschatology” or “propitiation” (although I do try to communicate the substance of them) perhaps we should also be careful in how we describe our harmatology.

It’s not like there isn’t precedent. In New Testament Greek “sin” is ἁμαρτία (harmatia) which connotes “missing the mark” or “wandering from the path” of God’s good ways; it speaks to a more fundamental wrongward inclination. It is also παράπτωμα (paraptoma) which has more of the connotation of “trespass”, “wrongdoing” or “lapse”; it speaks more to

specific actions that are wrong or done wrongly.

I think we are being lazy. Rather than communicating our intent, we use an ineffective jargon word, in which we expect even our interested listeners to do some semantical gymnastics in order to keep up with us. But even more worryingly, we end up lazy with our own thoughts, using a catch-all word where precision is necessary not only for mutual understanding, but for genuine expression that is also loving and caring.

Therefore, and to conclude, let us take a look at the pallid rainbow of the darkside of human existence. To be honest, even in my current use I wouldn't apply the word "sin" in all these instances. But it seems, that when we use the word it may be taken that way. It's worth a consideration; after all, if we use "sin" intending to communicate something akin to "wrongdoing" or "mistake" and it is heard as "evil", we can do immeasurable harm.

EVIL: "Sin" pertains to those things that are utterly antithetical to the things of life. "Sin" reigned through the workings of Pol Pot and Hitler. "Sin" is manifest at it's highest in serial killers and torturers. "Sin" is diabolical, demonic, irredeemably hell-bound.

CRUEL INTENTIONS: "Sin" pertains to those who delight in pain.

"Sin" pertains to sadistic abusers who are fully aware of what they are doing. This "sin" is not so much a desire to win but a desire to defeat others, no matter the cost. If it is not quite an evil lust for power, it is certainly a lust for control.

DELIBERATE REBELLION/HARD HEARTEDNESS: "Sin" pertains to those who manifest selfishness at its utmost. "Sin" will cast others aside in order to get what is wanted. This "sin" is machiavellian in the extreme. Others are means to an end.

Responsibilities cast aside, abandonment, and rejection. All this is "sin."

SENSUAL PASSIONS: “Sin” pertains to the idolatry of human passion. This is the domain of the “seven deadlies” – from raging anger, to rampant lustfulness, the flesh is king. Persons are reduced to animals, fresh meat, gold mines, for the satiation of appetite.

BONDAGE: “Sin” pertains to addictive behaviours. False comforts that are destructive, but provide temporary physical or emotional relief. Often in response to harms of the past, a destructive cycle becomes our own, and without consideration we ourselves become harmful.

NEGLIGENCE: “Sin” pertains to carelessness and neglect. Sins of omission which overlook or diminish others. Sins that refuse to see the image of God in the face of others. Racism and xenophobia, at the very least, are “sin” at this level.

MISTAKES: We stuff up. We hurt people. We harm them. And whether it is intended or not, such mistakes are our responsibility. We have done the wrong thing, and that is “sin.”

BROKENNESS: We are wounded, we are hurting. And often this means we believe wrongly about ourselves. We think we are evil, when evil has been done to us. We root our very person into shames that have been wrought upon us. At a very gentle level, this thinking about ourselves is wrong – and like all “sin” we must turn away from it.

As a final thought: In writing the above, the usefulness of the word “sin” in covering them all is that there is one answer to all these dark things: Jesus. From the defeat of evil at the top, to the gentle healing of brokenness at the bottom, he is the answer.

Conquering for the Commuter

A moment of reflection from this morning's drive while listening to Christy Nockels' *Healing is In Your Hands*:

Amongst the lyrics are echoes of Romans 8:35-39

*No mountain, no valley
No gain or loss we know
Could keep us from Your love*

*No sickness, no secret
No chain is strong enough
To keep us from Your love...*

*In all things we know that
We are more than conquerors
You keep us by Your love*

Romans 8:35-39 reads:

35 Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36 As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (ESV)

It's a passage that I know well. It's one of my favourites and has been a source of comfort for me when the emotions of the day feel like aloneness, anxiety, or even abandonment.



The phrase that struck me today is this: **"We are more than conquerors."**

It's one of those phrases that has what I call "teleological significance." It speaks to our *purpose*, our ambition, our direction, our goal. There's two facets to this:

The first recognises that what we observe in and around us in the world is a form of *conquering*. I see Islamic extremists beheading Christians; they are trying to *conquer* the world with their expression of Islam. I see areas of my own society, the Western World, which is blindly slipping into intolerant impositions that gives little value to freedom of conscience; it's another form of attempted conquering. It has ever been the way of the world. This should not surprise us.

The natural response is fear. What does the future look like? Will I and my children and my children's children be safe? To be safe, we look to *win*. We *fight* back. We use the same sword as what we perceive is against us: we spin and tear down, we demolish people as well as ideas, we demonise, we hound, we yell; we try to conquer.

The second facet recognises the reality: we are more than conquerors. And our safety and security rests not on the ways and woes of what is around us, but upon the love of God in

Jesus Christ. The Kingdom of God is not headed by a weakened or sin-wracked king, but by the one who has conquered even death. The foundation of our ultimate citizenship is sure, as is the certainty of it's future. God is the God of history, do you think he has abandoned this part of it?

And on that basis we face the conquering hordes (whoever or whatever they might be), not with fear, but in love-filled confidence. We speak and act on truth with our confidence not in ourselves, but in the love of God. We apply ourselves to *his* purpose. We *invest ourselves* in *his* loving works. We seek to capture every thought that's floating through the social conscience and reimagine it in the light of the fact that God is actually real, and Jesus has actually risen and inaugurated the life of a renewed world. *He* is so much more than any pretentious conqueror. And we rest and work and have our being in *him*.