

A Distorting Mirror Shame and the Proclamation of the Gospel

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He could still leave the chapel ... He could still escape from the shame. Had it been any terrible crime but that one sin! Had it been murder! Little fiery flakes fell and touched him at all points, shameful thoughts, shameful words, shameful acts. Shame covered him wholly like fine glowing ashes falling continually. To say it in words! His soul, stifling and helpless, would cease to be.

At last it had come. He knelt in the silent gloom and raised his eyes to the white crucifix suspended above him. God could see that he was sorry. He would tell all his sins. His confession would be long, long. Everybody in the chapel would know then what a sinner he had been. Let them know. It was true. But God had promised to forgive him if he was sorry. He was sorry. He clasped his hands and raised them towards the white form, praying with his darkened eyes, praying with all his trembling body, swaying his head to and fro like a lost creature, praying with whimpering lips. Sorry! Sorry! O sorry! ...

His sins trickled from his lips, one by one, trickled in shameful drops from his soul, festering and oozing like a sore, a squalid stream of vice. The last sins oozed forth, sluggish, filthy. There was no more to tell. He bowed his head, overcome.

The priest was silent. Then he asked:

- How old are you, my child?

- Sixteen, father. ...

Blinded by tears and by the light of God's mercifulness he bent his head and heard the grave words of absolution spoken and saw the priest's hand raised above him in token of forgiveness. ...

The muddy streets were gay. He strode homeward, conscious of an invisible grace pervading and making light his limbs. In spite of all he had done it. He had confessed and God had pardoned him. his soul was made fair and holy once more, holy and happy.

(James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.)

I find this extract from Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* both moving and disturbing. Moving, because it portrays so well the agony felt by the teenage boy as he struggles to face his feelings of embarrassment and shame; disturbing, because it equally well portrays how the Church's emphasis on Sin (and sins) can foster a destructive sense of personal worthlessness, shame and guilt. True, the boy in the extract left the church feeling better, but for how long? His sense of self had not been permanently strengthened by the encounter at the confessional – it is more likely that the next occasion for 'sin' would leave him feeling even more wretched, for then he would have 'fallen' even further from the path of goodness..

Historically, the western Church has emphasised sinfulness – with its accompanying feelings of guilt and shame – as a means of inspiring a desire for holiness and as a prelude to preaching a gospel of forgiveness. Many of the saints of the Church had a deep sense of their own worthlessness and shame; the General Confession in the Book of Common Prayer requires us sinners to confess that we are “miserable offenders” and “there is no health in us”; we are encouraged to perceive ourselves, like the Psalmist, “as a worm and not human” (Ps.22:6). It is only when we recognise ourselves as worthless and sinful creatures, it has been declared, does God give us his salvation, and offer, in his love and generosity, to forgive us.

The logic of such a gospel is presented as a strange kind of spiritual *quid pro quo*: the greater our sinfulness, the greater is God's gift of forgiveness to us; the more worthless we are, the more worthy God is. Shame and guilt are our way of knowing that we are sinful and worthless, *ergo* shame and guilt must increase in order for our desire for holiness to increase. In such a framework, humility is understood as self-deprecation (at the least) or actual despising of the self. From this perspective, it is anathema to perceive all people as part of the goodness of God's good creation; to recognise and rejoice in the divine life within every human being and to see ourselves as the crown of God's creative acts. Delighting in our God-given gifts and abilities as human beings, and believing in "original blessing" (Fox, 2000) rather than "original sin", are understood as indicators of the essential pride and sinfulness of humans and therefore something of which to be ashamed. Thus, instead of beginning with Irenaeus' dictum that "the glory of God is a human being fully alive", the preaching of *this* gospel begins with, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23), and those who are to receive it must first be convinced of their guilt, unworthiness and shame.

This emphasis on unworthiness and shame, which has been so much a part of Western theology, is still the dominating theme of the *kerygma* of many church traditions. I believe that an understanding of the effects of personal shame is an urgent and pertinent task for today's church if it is to be effective in its pastoral ministry and in its preaching of the gospel in today's society. It is especially relevant for us Tertiaries, as we seek to be true to Franciscan spirituality – which celebrates all of creation and rejoices in God's call to us to be fully alive human beings.

For inside the church and out, many men and women (most especially women) are crippled by shame and a sense of personal unworthiness. Even those who have hidden it well by being successful in certain areas of their lives, live in mortal fear of being exposed as frauds; while others are unable to be "fully alive" because of their overwhelming sense of inadequacy. Some of these people are clergy, desperately hoping that their deepest wounds will never be exposed and that their ministry will somehow compensate for their deeply held sense of sinfulness and shame. Ministers carrying psychological wounds such as these are a danger to themselves and to others: to themselves, because they are at risk of burn-out and depression; to others, because they may project onto those to whom they minister their own unacknowledged fears and unmet needs.

The insidiousness of chronic shame damages any sense of self and self-esteem. It acts like a mirror which is out of true. Rather than providing us with a clear reflection of ourselves as created and loved by God – a reflection which enables us to receive God's forgiveness and restoration when necessary – it distorts us and the image of God within us out of all proportion, and keeps us trapped in failure and despair.

Guilt and shame are frequently used synonymously. But they are significantly different, and an understanding of the distinction is important in considering what kind of gospel we proclaim.

Guilt is the pricking of conscience in response to an action which has broken a personal moral code or social ethic, and always involves another person – directly or indirectly. So, we experience guilt when we realise that in some way we have been

responsible for violating another person's human rights – whether that is as personal as hurling insults at a partner in a domestic row or as global as silent complicity in world poverty. Genuine guilt drives us beyond ourselves, to make amends, to repent and change our attitudes or our actions. It is a necessary and healthy aspect of being human, and those who show no guilt or remorse are diagnosed as sociopaths and deemed a danger to society.

Shame, on the other hand, is the emotional and physiological response to some kind of failure, weakness or flaw in our very Self. It is the sense of being useless and worthless, “beyond the pale”, “weighed in the balance and found wanting”; of being alienated, abandoned, and above all, exposed. Unlike guilt, it does not arise from something done to another, but from the horror of being exposed. The desire to hide, so typical of shame, comes from the terror of being seen. Far from healing and restoring relationships, shame drives us inward, in an attempt to hide from others, ourselves and God. It makes us afraid of being seen by God – who becomes for us the ‘All-seeing Eye’, omniscient and terrifying. In the ‘distorting mirror’ of shame, it is impossible to see ourselves as God sees us – God’s chosen, holy and beloved (Col.3:12), “in whom he delights” (Is.42:1). Instead, we see ourselves as diminished, worthy only of obliteration and death.

Psychologists understand chronic, internalised shame as the product of certain childhood experiences. Sexual, physical and emotional abuse will inevitably produce a sense of badness and shamefulness in a child. Repeated humiliations at the hands of parents or teachers, especially in front of others, are also causes of chronic shame, for the memories stay raw and unhealed, even into adulthood. Unreasonable expectations placed on a child, such as gaining high academic, musical or sporting achievements, may create distress and ultimate shame in a child who cannot reach them. Even unrealistically high expectations of good behaviour can foster a sense of shamefulness, especially when the parents’ feel that their good name is at stake.

Caused by these and other experiences, many adults carry within themselves a sense of shame and worthlessness. They need to hear a gospel which restores their self-esteem, not one which emphasises their sinful, shameful self. They especially do not need to hear a gospel which “blames” them for Christ’s death. Certain kinds of *kerygma* and a certain genre of hymnody continue to foster this idea:

At the cross in holy love God through Christ paid the full penalty of our disobedience himself. He bore the judgement we deserve in order to bring us the forgiveness we do not deserve (Stott, 1986:89).

Come and weep, come and mourn,
For your sin that pierced Him there;
So much deeper than the wounds of thorn and nails,
All our pride, all our greed,
All our fallenness and shame;
And the Lord has laid the punishment on Him (Kendrick, 1989)

The historic emphasis on ‘pride’ as the root of all sinfulness totally fails to comprehend the enormity of internalised shame. This is particularly relevant for women and men whose sense of self has either been stripped away or has never been allowed to develop, and whose greatest need is for self-acceptance, self-love, self-assertiveness and the celebration of their gifts and abilities.

Those called into ministries of preaching and teaching have a responsibility to take account of the effects of internalised shame, so that the Gospel is truly healing and redeeming. Too strong an emphasis on being “guilty sinners” before God can be counter-productive at best and damaging at worst. This is not to deny that those who are genuinely guilty need to hear that they are forgiven. There are actions and attitudes which are rightly termed ‘sinful’, which need to be confessed by individuals, society and faith-communities, and for which they appropriately seek the forgiveness of God.

But those whose Self has been shattered by humiliation and abuse, those frozen by shame and those who have no confidence in their personal power, need the healing which comes from encouragement to be autonomous, assertive and self-dependent, so that they can lift up their heads, value themselves and know their worth before God.

Rather than being invited into repentance, shamed people need the message of Irenaeus that “God became human in order that humans should become divine” – the extraordinary and amazing concept that human beings are on a journey of growth and development into the divine life. They need to be reminded that Christ came to show us what humans are *becoming* – we are called to show the glory of God by being “fully alive” (Irenaeus). A *kerygma* of salvation which is meaningful and healing for today will take account of the damage caused by chronic shame, false guilt and self-negation, and proclaim a God who reaches out in love and delight to embrace those he has created.

Scripture invites us to seek the face of God, to look to him so that we will not be ashamed (Pss. 34:5; 27:831:1,16,17). Jesus’ parable of ‘The Prodigal Son’ shows a father who is shameless in his desire to run towards his errant son, teaching us about a God who is equally shameless in His desire to restore a ruptured relationship with us. Rowan Williams reminds us of God’s eager desire for us in his meditation on the beautiful Eleousa icon, which shows the child Jesus in his mother’s arms:

If we begin, as most of us tend to, with a notion that God stands at a distance waiting for us to make a move in his direction, this image should give us something of a shock. The Lord here does not wait impassive, as we babble on about our shame and penitence, trying to persuade him that we are worth forgiving. His love is instead that of an eager and rather boisterous child, scrambling up on his mother’s lap ... nuzzling his face against hers ... (2002:23).

I believe it is *this* portrayal of God which will speak most powerfully to the women and men of today’s shame-based society, who carry within them a crippling sense of their worthlessness and shamefulness. Truly Franciscan, this Gospel is one which includes in its proclamation the message that God delights in his creation – and therefore in each one of us. It declares that God, far from being a terrifying ‘All-seeing Eye’ which sees all that we have tried to hide from ourselves and others, is so much in love with us that he cannot take his eyes off us (Hume, 1998:91). Above all, it proclaims that when we were still far off, God “ran out to meet us” in Christ, so that in His love, we can be re-created and experience His face shining on us and delighting in us.

If, as is inevitable, theological understanding is shaped by the social and philosophical milieu in which it is embedded, images and metaphors which express the gospel of salvation will also need to change according to the context into which that gospel is preached. The challenge to us as Franciscan Tertiaries is to maintain the spirit of St. Francis by continuing to find images and expressions of the Gospel which speak to people today.

References and further reading:

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