

Holy Week: Honesty and the path to the cross



A memory from early childhood... I remember my father coming into the back garden. I must have been seven. I was playing with my dog underneath the apricot tree... My father was smoking. He started smoking when he was about ten years old and smoked all of his life. My father had a love-hate relationship with nicotine. He took a long drag on his 'ciggie' and then he looked across at me and said, *"Don't do what I do. Do what I say. Don't smoke."* And then he laughed and took another long drag on his cigarette.

I can still feel the sense of confusion and bewilderment at what my father was saying to me and the paradox of his words. On the one hand, he was telling me what not to do, whilst on the other, he was acting out in front of me the behaviour that he was telling me was not good for me, but that he himself was going to continue to do. My father would often tell me that smoking was 'a *mug's game...*' It was one of the few ways that he allowed himself to be vulnerable with me. What my father could never tell me was that he loved to smoke. He loved his drug of choice – despite what the consequences might be.

It was only later when working with mainline heroin addicts that I began to fully appreciate how powerful the physical and psychological dependency on nicotine could be. Coming off heroin is a really difficult thing to do. But for most of the addicts that I worked with, resolved to live a healthier lifestyle, nicotine was more often than not a step too far.

And here's the thing... Addictive behaviours bring to the very fore of our psyche how difficult it is for us human beings to be honest with ourselves. In my head, I might be able to rationalise away why I should not do what I know to be bad for me - or even, I know in my head why I should not act out certain behaviours which are bad for me, and equally, and perhaps even more damaging, has negative consequences for others, not least those I happen to live with. Ciggies, chocolate, alcohol, heroin, violence, sexual perversions. I know this in my head. But in my heart, I love what I do. And what I love to do gives me temporary relief from my own powerlessness and impotence. Even though I know in my head that this is bad for me. In my heart, I love this. I am addicted to that which seduces me, even though I know it hurts me. I love this escape into the delusional self.

Psychoanalysis helps the addicted personality type to understand the early emotional deprivations that lead to such behaviours manifesting themselves in sadomasochistic ways. Such understanding is often helpful, and psychotherapy can help change some behaviours. But not always. Psychotherapy has its limits. Some people are simply too damaged for psychotherapy to be the cure. Hegel tells us that if we hold to reality then we will be given freedom. But what if reality is too painful, too difficult to bear?

Human beings can only tolerate so much honesty. Too much honesty, too much reality, overwhelms us. Try changing the mind of a Parochial Church Council when everyone tells you that they agree with you Vicar - but no one agrees to change. Too much honesty, too much reality, and we retreat into our defended and addictive behaviours. We find relief in repeating the patterns that ultimately hurt us. Better to die in the old life... than to live in the changed and very unfamiliar new...

I have come to understand that God alone, incarnated in the crucified, holds all honesty in his hands. The unbearable truth for humankind – the limits of our capacity to tolerate what it means to be truly honest – is given over to God. If I am limited by my own psychological make-up, gifted to me by my parents and my grandparents before them, then by faith alone, I know that I can be reassured by Christ crucified, that, that honesty which I cannot bear, God will bear for me. By faith, I project onto and into the heart of God that which to my own heart remains unknown or at best, only partly known to me because in truth, if I'm honest, I don't want to know, and I cannot bear to know any more truth.

My understanding of God, my own theology, takes me to a place where the crucified is changed beyond what I can and am willing to articulate for myself. This gives me hope....

And why it is that I am glad to be part of the Easter People.

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