

Dear Friends,

I was wanting a big book to keep me going for a long time during these days when a friend mentioned she had been reading the American novelist John Steinbeck. When I was at school we had his great work *The Grapes of Wrath* for English A-level and I was much impressed by it, a moving and powerful story of poor farmers from dust-bowl Oklahoma seeking a new life in the promised land of California - and finding hardship and rejection just as refugees do today. There is another big book of Steinbeck's which I got hold of, one I had never read before and am working through now, *East of Eden*, a family saga taking place over several generations and set in the Salinas valley of California where Steinbeck grew up.

Part of the novel is a rewriting of the story of Cain and Abel, called here Cal and Aron (Cal was played by the legendary James Dean in the film version). They have a Chinese man called Lee looking after them who hears the biblical story, is much affected by it and wants to study the original text in order to discover the true interpretation and especially how we should understand the nature of sin. In the story Cain is mysteriously rejected by God, who favours Abel, and so is tempted into sin, which ends in him killing his brother.

With the help of fellow Chinese scholars and after much study Lee goes deeply into the Hebrew wording of the story and discovers three different versions of a crucial phrase which have influenced our understanding. One bids mankind to triumph over sin, which throws the weight onto obedience to God; another sees us as predestined to go astray, such that nothing we do can avert what will be; but the Hebrew word which is used here, *timshel*, 'Thou mayest,' gives us the possibility of freewill, the ability to choose, either to follow God's ways or go our own way.

Christian thinking has not always been true to the meaning of the Jewish Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, and thereby sometimes got itself into tangles. Our doctrine of original sin, for example, can suggest that human beings are so essentially flawed that they can never do right and good by their own efforts and are doomed always to go wrong. So we need the rescue operation mounted by God in Jesus to redeem us, to buy us back by his own sacrifice of himself. This version can easily make God into a bloodthirsty monster, who is so enraged by the wickedness of the people he has created to go wrong that he demands fearful suffering as the price required to work our redemption. It has always been difficult to frame a really satisfactory theory of atonement, so much so that some Christians have preferred to see the Crucifixion not as a price to pay, but as an *example* of how great God's love is, how far he is prepared to go to show his love for his people.

If we have to obey God in triumphing over sin the emphasis is again out of true. Having to obey someone who has greater power compromises your freedom: you can do little else. But *timshel*, 'Thou mayest,' indicates our ability to choose (if 'Thou mayest,' it must also be the case that 'Thou mayest not') and it preserves the doctrine of original blessing which precedes and is not negated by original sin. God who is good can only create what is good, so the world and humanity are in essence, as the creation of God, good. If we did not have goodness in us as

created by God, we would not be able to choose the good. One of the characters in *East of Eden*, the mother of the brothers, has become so immersed in evil that she has almost lost the ability to choose what is good - and that too is a possibility for us. Steinbeck seems to suggest that it is partly because of how she has been treated in her life, but there is still an irreducible core of sheer evil at the heart of her which cannot be explained in other ways. And yet such cases are mercifully rare. We can choose and be good.

I am often amused these days by hearing people when asked, 'How are you?' say 'I am good.' It sounds presumptuous to call oneself good and Jesus does say, 'Call no-one good; only your Father in heaven is good.' If we are good, it is not so much because we are good, but because *God* is good. It is the God in us who enables us to be good, but it still depends upon us to choose - either to follow the God in us, or to go our own way.

The freedom of choice that we have becomes very important in relation to forgiveness, which is clearly a key element in the Christian life. The Gospel reading for this Sunday is a parable about our need to forgive others who have done wrong to us if we expect to be forgiven ourselves, as we say in the Our Father: 'forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.' The Gospel picks up the message in the first reading from Ecclesiasticus: 'Forgive your neighbour the hurt he does you and when you pray your sins will be forgiven.' If we did not know that everyone else has the same freedom to choose good or evil that we do, rather than being compelled to act in this way or that, it would be difficult to forgive. If we sometimes go wrong and make bad choices we can forgive others who do the same, and knowing that we ourselves are forgiven should make it possible to realise that so is everyone else.

I once heard a survivor of the concentration camps, someone who had suffered terribly at the hands of others, say that it was only when she was able to accept the truth of what had happened to her that she could find it in herself to forgive the perpetrators. So often we want to deny unbearable realities and wish them away, but denial will always impair our freedom. If you can say, 'Yes, I know this is what has happened to me, I accept this truth however painful it may be,' that can be the beginning of release from the burden of the memory of it, and - though it will never be easy and perhaps should not be easy - the beginning of the ability to forgive those responsible.

Some people talk about what is called the Welcome Practice. Whenever we are caught up in a painful or difficult situation, it is saying, 'I welcome this cancer, this bereavement, this loss of my job - not for what it is in itself, but knowing that God is with me in it, and knowing that there is nothing so bad that God cannot turn it into good.' This may be a helpful way of accepting the bad things that happen to us without losing heart or hope. Then we can move on from acceptance to forgiveness - of ourselves and others.

The second reading for this Sunday, from Saint Paul's letter to the Romans, says, 'The life and death of each of us has its influence on others; if we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord, so that alive or dead we belong to the Lord.' At the heart of Christian faith is the belief that God in Jesus has entered fully into our human condition and shown us how we

can be released from everything that makes us unfree so that we may know 'the glorious liberty of the children of God.' And we are all in it together! Everyone born into this world shares the same inheritance, the same calling to be set free by God to love as he loves us and to enjoy his love for ever.

Wishing you every blessing, Fr. Robin (robinburgess@rcdow.org.uk).