Saturday Lent Week Two

There are no heroes any more, only celebrities. That is how it seems, anyway, in a culture where we project perfection on those we put on pedestals. Then, the exposure of human weakness, sinfulness or historical misdemeanour, incites mob rage on social media and a public execution on a virtual scaffold. How are the mighty fallen and how, secretly, as the media sales show, we enjoy their disgrace, their fall from grace.

Leaving the personal sin aside for a moment, the blame for this social state of affairs falls on both sides. There are those who create false gods and then idolise them. And there are the idols who exploit the privileges they receive, power, attention, wealth. Then there are idols who don’t want the privileges but just passively go along with it. Anyone who feels they are being idolised has a responsibility to declare and show they are only human. When Cornelius fell at Peter’s feet and worshipped him, Peter replied ‘get up. I am only a human being like you’. His own previous weaknesses were of course part of the story by them.

There is a lot of forgiveness, repentance and new beginnings in the Bible stories. But no perfect characters. Well, we would say there is one; but holiness and authenticity are better terms to describe him than perfection, which is more of a mathematical term than a human one. Perfection dehumanises us. Wholeness, integral humanity, loving-kindness, non-violence: these are the qualities we see in him. They are not superhuman or supernatural but simply fully human, revealing our own actual true nature. What we can be and what we are called to be *is* our true nature. We are not perfect but we can aspire to wholeness.

And what is this elusive wholeness we feel ineluctably drawn to through the never-ending healing of our serial imperfections and failures to be our true selves? Freedom from self-deception, freedom to love to the fullest human capacity, unflinching clarity of mind and a gentleness of heart taken to the most vulnerable degree, the humility to try again.

Moses was refused entry into the Promised Land because his faith had once faltered and he had failed as a leader. King David lusted after another man’s wife and killed her husband so he could have his way with her. Solomon the Wise ended his days as an old lecher with a thousand women in his harem. Elijah the prophet slaughtered 850 of his religious opponents after he had showed them the superiority of his God.

And so on, until our own times and the revelations of endemic sin and hypocrisy in the religious leaders of many traditions in whom people put their faith and, perhaps unconsciously, expected them to be more perfect than they were. Not surprisingly, the only sinners whom Jesus pointed angrily to were not the public sinners but the ones who hid their sin under their religious persona.

Lent is not a time to play at being more religious but for purifying our religiousness until it better conforms to the truth about ourselves. This cannot be done firstly in public but only in our inner room with the doors closed.