

St Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside, London EC2V 6AU  
**High Mass and Imposition of Ashes on Ash Wednesday**  
The Revd George Bush, Rector  
Wednesday 6th March 2019

So who is to blame? Who got us into the mess? Someone needs to take responsibility.  
Someone needs to bear the shame.

How can it be that there is so much of our plastic usage ending up in the oceans that fish feed on fragments and a turtle will cheerfully eat a plastic bag which then so fills its stomach that it starves to death. Who invented this stuff, who makes it, who collects it and disposes of it? Who on earth wants it?

How can it be that a child is groomed for service with an evil army, is beguiled into marriage and then witnesses without any seeming horror appalling violence, for a cause in which she believes, and believes to be godly? Is she guilty and if not who is?  
How is it that national prosperity can be posited upon something so viscerally divisive as the present negotiations and who concluded that this process was worthwhile in the first place?

Who is responsible for the wave of violent assault across our City – teachers, parents, drug dealers, distracted and feckless youth, poor local and national leadership? Why have youth clubs been abolished? Why doesn't the Church offer better and stronger moral leadership? And if not now, why not twenty years ago?

What the hell was going on in religious and educational institutions such the people did not appreciate the scale of the suffering of abusive purpose and practice. And where we suspected or knew, how did we allow power so to be constructed that we feared to defend ourselves and others?

No wonder that an Indian has decided to sue his parents for bringing him into the vale of tears which he has discovered life to be – parenting as culpable; conception as crime. Human reaction from satire to war crimes trial looks for a perpetrator; whether villain or scapegoat. The instinctive reaction to escape blame or exposure is to lie or obfuscate. The genuine mistake, owned up to with honesty and clarity is often presented as an admission of weakness or incompetence. Yet you could be forgiven for thinking that there are things which are genuinely unforgiveable.

I don't pretend that this is not complicated. I recall writing an essay as a fifth former on the death penalty of which I have always been an impatient opponent. But in this essay I excepted the criminals of the Holocaust whom I deemed worthy of the penalty, and was marked down for an inconsistent moral argument. I would still argue that point, if with slightly more nuance and – probably – better spelling.

The practice of Ash Wednesday and of Lent is that we emerge from the shadows and admit our own guilt and moreover our complicity. This might take the form of a confession of guilt to God in the presence of a priest (or otherwise) or it might be a considered self-examination of faith, relationships and responsibilities. Self-examination as the route to self-knowledge is a condition of the humility to which we are called. And although we take to ourselves the reassurance of God's forgiveness and acceptance there may be, for many of us and long past, moments and carelessnesses which yet remain burdensome and fill our 'Lord have mercy' with real content. This is not a failure of faith but a trick of human pathology; and perhaps may make us gentle with those whose failings are exposed to public opprobrium.

But we are not free to stop at our own list of sins and omissions; although we may be more emotionally engaged with what we sense that we have done or ought to have done. There used to be little penetrating manuals of self-examination to assist; but 'have I been unkind to my maid?' and 'was this alone or with others?' no longer delivers the verdict. We are all in this together – creators and products of the world and the communities we both love and abuse. We are forgiven together. The disciplines of Lent – the control of appetites and habits are, of course an offering - but also symbols of penitence. But given where we are, we might just as well propose that the avoidance of, say meat, should comprehend the avoidance of all plastic; though both would be useful.

The passing of blame, the construction of elaborate sagas of responsibility may be all part of an accountable democracy. But the myth of our ignorance or innocence won't do. Perhaps never before have humans been more alert to our depredations and less free to distance ourselves from their manifestations. For this reason alone Christians should be very careful about apportioning blame. 'For our sake he made him to be sin, who knew no sin'; acknowledging the dreadful fault line of our nature and occluding it with his presence. He is our blame and our shame.

Indeed it may be argued that the Church should shoulder a greater measure of guilt for generosity's sake. Dostoevsky has Father Zossima say, 'There is only one way of salvation, and that is to make yourself responsible for all men's sins...Remember especially that you cannot be the judge of anyone. For no one can judge a criminal, until he recognises that he himself is just such a criminal as the man standing before him, and that perhaps he is more to blame ... for the crime which the man on trial has committed ... For if I had been righteous myself, perhaps there would have been no criminal standing before me'.