

## Views from the Pews for Lent 2: Original sin

Traditional theology has always made a distinction between original sin as an inescapable inherited predisposition, and personal sin as an individual, deliberate act. If original sin is equated with the inherent conflicts between personal and group advantage, which can be observed in most sociable animals including us, then we certainly are born with it.

We may know very well that there are good reasons why we should be honest, chaste, sober, hardworking, faithful and public-spirited in this life, yet somehow it is never as easy as that. St Paul hit the nail right on the head: 'When I want to do the right, only the wrong is in my reach. In my inmost self I delight in the law of God, but...there is in my bodily members a different law, fighting against the law that my reason approves....' (Rom.7:21-24). Paul could hardly have written a better description of the inner conflicts generated by the meeting of our animal and cultural heritages if he had been schooled in evolutionary biology.

Augustine's 4<sup>th</sup>-century elaboration of the Eden story in pursuit of his doctrine of original sin is a story that is not literally true but carries important real truths. It is a vivid picture of the consequences of deliberate personal sin. But Augustine could not account for the way that we all continue to be just as disobedient as Adam was except by suggesting that Adam's personal guilt was transmitted to all his otherwise innocent descendants. That idea makes no sense to us.

Contemporary science offers us a gentler way to see an important distinction between our animal ancestry referring to what we *are*, versus our cultural heritage strongly influencing what we *do*. We cannot escape these two streams of sometimes conflicting inherited information. But how we make the daily choices between self-interest and group interest is up to us. Yes, we all have to live in the body bequeathed to us by our genetic heritage, but we are fully

capable (within limits) of deciding what to do in it. Human nature is malleable by culture and circumstances, to produce individual public-spirited or selfish behaviour according to our own unconscious estimates of the odds on which strategy might pay best, and (more importantly), who is watching at the moment.

As Charles Wesley says, we should always remember that it is God 'whose eyes my inmost substance see'.

*Kim King*