

When I was nine I had a job as a message boy for a grocer's shop at the top of the street. It was a big store with a workforce of eight, both women and men. One morning when the shop was quiet an incident occurred which has stayed in my memory. There was a big store room at the back of the shop, with a long table in the middle, used for measuring and bagging, slicing and sorting. On the morning in question there was a conspiratorial buzz among the male members of staff, who were all drifting towards the store room. I joined them, wondering what was up. It was obvious that, whatever was afoot, the ringleader was the oldest man on the staff, a self-important person who seemed to think himself a cut above the rest of us. When we had all gathered he hushed us to silence, and a few seconds later one of the women workers came into the room, presumably to pick up something for a customer. As soon as she entered, the door was closed, then locked, and the men surrounded her. The atmosphere, as I remember it, was jokey rather than menacing, and the woman giggled nervously as though she knew what was coming. Mr Self-Importance gave the signal and the men grabbed the woman and lifted her onto the table on her back. Though she struggled a bit, it seemed to me to be more of a lark than a lynching, and she didn't call out for help. I didn't exactly know what was going on, but played a significant part in what happened. Though she was being held down on her back on the table, her legs were still hanging over the side. Entering the fun, I took hold of her ankles and lifted her legs onto the table, provoking the congratulations of Mr Self-Importance for my assistance. He then shoved his hand under her skirt.....And it was all over. They let her up, she adjusted her clothes, left the room and the men all went back to work. Nothing was said after the incident, and no reference was ever made to it. I stopped working there soon afterwards.¹

These are the words of a former Gresham Professor of Divinity, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, Chairman of the Joint Board of the Scottish Arts Council and Scottish Screen, a regular contributor to *The Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Observer*, the *Herald* and the *Scotsman* and, on occasion, a presenter for the BBC. He has also been Bishop of Edinburgh and Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church. These are the opening words of Richard Holloway in his new book, *Between the Monster and the Saint*. Holloway quotes Blake Morrison from his book, *As If*, in which Morrison recounts in more graphic detail than I can comfortably quote here his participation in the rape of a friend by himself and others when he was fourteen. Nature, says Holloway, 'is at its most tyrannical in the reproductive drive, sex,

¹ Holloway, Richard *Between the Monster and the Saint*, xiii

where it can quench not only normal human sympathy, but rationality as well.’² Boldly, he confesses, ‘There is no doubt that looking at women as sexual objects is a dominant aspect of male heterosexuality, and there are few men who have not experienced its disturbing power.’³

From sex he moves to violence.

In 1757, Robert-Francois Damiens, a French soldier, tried to assassinate King Louis XV by stabbing him as he got into his carriage at Versailles. The attempt failed and Damiens was found guilty of *lese-majeste* and parricide. His sentence was execution by a form of torture called the *amende honorable*. The order for his execution read:

On 2 March 1757 Damiens the regicide was condemned ‘to make the *amende honorable* before the main door of the Church of Paris’, where he was to be ‘taken in a cart wearing nothing but a shirt, holding a torch of burning wax weighing two pounds’; then, ‘in the said cart, to the Place de Greve, where, on a scaffold that will be erected there, the flesh will be torn from his breasts, arms, thighs and calves with red hot pincers, his right hand, holding the knife with which he committed the said parricide, burnt with sulphur, and on those places where the flesh will be torn away, poured molten lead, boiling oil, burning resin, wax and sulphur melted together and then his body drawn and quartered by four horses and his limbs and body consumed by fire, reduced to ashes and his ashes thrown to the winds.

What happened on his day of execution was not exactly as the order had stated but his death was no less gruesome. When asked if he was in favour of a ‘dunk in the water’ for the interrogation of suspected terrorists, Vice President Cheney said that it was a ‘no-brainer.’ A ‘dunk in the water’ or waterboarding, that is creating the sensation of drowning in the victim, was used in the sixteenth century in the Italian Inquisition, by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia in the 1970s and by the United States in Iraq in the twenty-first century. In addition to extreme physical pain and distress, the Americans have used psychological pressure, through sexual humiliation, as a means of torture. Holloway says that ‘Torture was used by Russia in Chechnya, by the French in Algeria and by the British in Kenya.’ It would be obvious to

² Holloway, Richard Between the Monster and the Saint, p10

³ Holloway, Richard Between the Monster and the Saint, p5

point to Germany, to ordinary Germans becoming Nazis, and to the torture and killing which they carefully designed and delivered but, and this would be Holloway's point, we are all of us capable, given the right set of circumstances, to act immorally, violently, with a complete disregard for the humanity of others and indifferent to their suffering: all of us.

Forthrightly, he says:

We are strangely subject to the gravitational pull of the human herd. Sometimes the consequences of this magnetic force are endearingly pathetic, such as the need to have the latest fashion accessory or the most versatile mobile phone; but sometimes the consequences are truly terrifying. The human herd, when collectively aroused, is the most ferocious beast on the planet. It is responsible for every lynching.....every act of genocide, every heresy hunt, every ugly bout of group thinking that has ever afflicted the humanity community. Sadly, there always seem to be charismatic monsters around who are brilliant at rousing the herd and hypnotising it into obedient servitude to their terrifying visions.

Closer to the animals than the angels, we need honesty about who we are and what we are.

There is honesty in the Bible. No sooner has humanity appeared in the Creation myths of the Book of Genesis than there is a murder: Cain kills his brother, Abel. In the story of the Flood, Noah is described as a 'just man', a man who 'walked with God.' He saved people and animals from the flood; he made a covenant with God. In the story of the Flood, Noah is the spiritual leader, the spiritual giant but he is not perfect and his drunkenness brings shame upon himself and his family. Moses, drawn out of the water as a baby, a royal son of the Pharaoh, Rameses, becomes the instrument of God for the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt. At Mount Sinai, it is Moses who ascends the mountain and it is Moses whose face is again and again transfigured with light because he is able to draw nearer to God than any other mortal. Yet, Moses was a murderer: he murdered an Egyptian and hid his body in the sand. David, the greatest of all Israel's kings, was an adulterer and he arranged for the murder of the woman's husband. Who are we? What are we? Honesty is the only place to start in answering these questions. In order to survive in this evolutionary universe, we have

needed the tyrannical sex drive, the herd mentality and the capacity for violence.

Paradoxically, the attributes of which we are perhaps most morally ashamed are the ones which have ensured our survival as a species. So much for the monster inside us: what of the saint?

Holloway believes that a saint is a person who stands apart from the herd. A saint perceives truth and is able to honour it, live by it and very often die for it. A saint is not influenced by power and, above all, recognises, acknowledges and, through word and protest, is prepared to defend life: the life of other human beings, other creatures with which we share this planet and the earth itself. In the twentieth century there is perhaps no better example than the Revd Dr Martin Luther King. He was the Moses of his day. He spoke out to bring freedom from oppression to black people. He was opposed by individuals, sheriffs, governors and school principals as well as institutions like the FBI. Dr King was not morally perfect. He had many partners besides his wife. He was an adulterer but he was a saint in the biblical sense. Stepping outside of his intrinsic evolutionary nature in terms of violence, if not sex, Dr King refused to use violence to defeat violence. He told his followers, 'Love your enemies and let them know you love them.'

Living that message on a daily basis, treating with respect and love those who hated him and preaching equality for all not advantage for the few, he eventually towered over the herd.

Not for a moment did Dr King think about or treat his enemy like an object. He understood his enemies to be human and therefore broken, in need of justice certainly but also in need of pity, compassion and understanding. He refused to treat them the way they treated him.

When we are wronged we have the almost uncontrollable desire to injure the one who has

injured us. Dr King stands above the herd: ‘Love your enemies and let them know you love them.’

Saints, true saints, are few and far between. As Holloway brings his book to its conclusion, he turns to Jesus. Of Jesus, Holloway writes:

[Christianity’s] scripture contains an account of the most complete reversal of the way of force, [the tyrannical and violent ways of the herd,] ever dreamt by the human soul. Its most lyrical expression is found in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus congratulates his followers for being poor, hungry, bereaved and persecuted.....Jesus [said,] *Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth; but I say unto you, That ye resist not evil; but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also...Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.*

Jesus lived this out even as he faced death. His disciple, Peter, argued with him, said that he, Jesus, should never suffer. When challenged by Peter, Jesus replies, ‘Get ye behind me, Satan.’ It is as if he were saying, ‘What do you think the Sermon on the Mount was about?!’

Holloway concludes:

We see these reversals of the way of force in the crucifixion of Jesus, where he performs in deed what he had proclaimed in word. He offers no resistance to those who arrest him. In the midst of the noisy hatred that surrounds him, he is silent. ‘And the chief priests accused him of many things: but he answered nothing. And Pilate asked him again, saying, Answerest thou nothing? behold how many things they witness against thee. But Jesus yet answered nothing; so that Pilate marvelled.’ Jesus refuses to respect force, either by opposing it or submitting to it: he ignores it.He ignores its angry presence. If force is the psychological gravity of the man-made world, we can only conclude that there was a lightness in Jesus that made him impervious to what presses other people down. [He rose above the herd.] He seemed impervious to the pressures that bend humans into shapes of fear or compliance or anger.⁴

Truthfully, we live on that spectrum between the monster and the saint. That is the backdrop to our faith. When we reflect on what it means to follow Jesus perhaps we can now abandon any notion that what he is expecting is moral perfection, perhaps we can embrace one another

⁴ Holloway, Richard *Between the Monster and the Saint*, p168

as broken, misshaped people, misshaped by evolution and the circumstances of our upbringing and life, and perhaps we can live, individually and collectively, as a people forgiven and forgiving. Would we welcome Moses into this community or King David?

Amen.