

The “Ostrich Syndrome”

There is a popular myth that an ostrich hides its head in the sand when threatened, but that’s all it is – a myth. A nesting ostrich will lower its head and neck along the ground to avoid being seen, but at 8ft tall and 300 pounds in weight if it chose to an ostrich could defend itself far more effectively than by simply hiding its head! I mention this only because we can sometimes (perhaps often) find ourselves trying to hide our head in the sand in our relationship with God.

In the Book of Genesis we have the story of Adam and Eve’s joint sin of disobedience and then their hiding from God - hiding themselves but also trying to hide their sin as if God didn’t know. When God confronts Adam, instead of accepting personal responsibility for his action, he blames Eve and when God questions Eve she, in turn, blames the serpent. If there had been anyone else around, no doubt the serpent would have blamed them!

We get ourselves into situations of our own making, but then haven’t the courage to admit our mistakes and so end up making things even worse, often by telling lies rather than facing up to the consequences of the choices we have made or the situations we have got ourselves into. There is a classic (and true) story that I regularly use at school Masses but which is a good story for adults too. It’s amazing, really, that this incident stuck in my mind at the time and that it has stayed there over the years – but I’m glad it did!

One of my boyhood friends who lived a couple of doors away had discovered that his mother’s milk jug was excellent for catching bees. It was a glass jug with a screw-on plastic handle and a top that flipped open when you pressed the button on the handle. He would sneak up on a bee on a flower with the lid open and then let it snap shut trapping the bee inside. However his mother caught him in the act one day (I was there but I wasn’t the one catching bees - honestly) and he got a real telling off because his mother was very fond of her milk jug and that’s not what it was meant for. I can’t remember whether she was equally concerned about the bees!

Anyway, one Saturday morning not too long afterwards, his mother went off to town shopping and as it was a nice sunny day and the bees were out he decided he’d get the jug and catch a few. We reminded him of what his mother had said but he was determined. So there he was catching one bee after another and concentrating so hard on the task in hand that he didn’t notice the clothes prop behind him as he turned round. It knocked the jug out of his hand and it smashed to pieces as it hit the garden path. He was horror-struck because, of course, there was no way to reverse what had happened and so he panicked. After a few moments thought he ran to the garden shed, got a spade and dug a

hole in the garden, then, carefully sweeping up all the debris, it all went in the hole which he filled in and smoothed over so no one would notice. And, somewhat amazingly, no one did – well not at first anyway.

But then a few weeks later his father decided he was going to do a little gardening and there he was turning over the soil when all of a sudden he dug up not only a lot of broken glass, but also a plastic handle which he seemed to recognise. He called his wife to come out and have a look and that's when the bottom fell out of my friend's world – and it was his bottom that he was most concerned about because those were the good old days when physical chastisement was par for the course. A “good hiding” resulted.

The moral of the story is, of course, that it was bad enough that my friend had disobeyed his mother in the first place by continuing to catch bees in her milk jug; it was even worse that he had broken the jug as a result; but it was worse still that, rather than owning up, he had buried the evidence in the garden (and with it, figuratively, his head) in the hope that he would get away with it.

There's another classic story, this time from scripture¹, involving King David – God's own anointed, remember. David falls in love with Bathsheba and begins an adulterous affair with her. When she subsequently discovers she is expecting his baby, David sends for her husband Uriah, who was an officer in the King's army, invites him to dinner, makes sure he has a lot to drink, and then sends him home to his wife in the hope that the conjugal visit might provide an explanation for her condition. Unfortunately Uriah is so loyal to the King that he refuses to go home and so sleeps by the palace door instead. David tries the same thing the next night but, again, it doesn't work. So now, in his desperation, King David sends Uriah back to join his army and arranges to have him stationed somewhere where the fighting is so heavy that he is certain to be killed – which is what happens.

God, of course, knows exactly what King David has done and why, and sends the prophet Nathan to confront him and call him to account for his sins. Thus accused, David repents of the wrong he has done, begging and receiving God's forgiveness – which should offer hope and encouragement to all of us who, hopefully, haven't done anything anywhere as near as serious as David had. But, of course, it would have been better if David hadn't got himself into that string of situations in the first place.

You will have heard the old saying that you can fool some of the people some of the time but you can't fool all of the people all of the time, but what we tend to forget is that we can't fool God *any* of the time. When we were kids we probably had an image of God as this white bearded old judge sitting there

¹ 2 Sam 11 & 12 v 1-14

waiting to pounce on us for every little thing that we did wrong. Because, as kids, we never seemed to get away with very much, then if our parents and teachers and other adults could find us out so easily, it must surely be easier still for God. By the time we became adults ourselves, we had learned to be a little more sophisticated in our efforts to hide our wrong-doing, even our law-breaking, and so too (we mistakenly think) even our breaking of God's law. This is, again, hiding our head in the sand.

God doesn't need to "pounce", he never did. Where would he pounce from? He is everywhere all the time, all around us and in us. (Psalm 139[138] "O Lord you search me and you know me..." is a wonderful reflection on this truth.) It was St Augustine who said that God is closer to us than we are to ourselves – stop and think about that: *God is closer to us than we are to ourselves*. It shouldn't be an oppressive presence (except for a guilty conscience) but rather reassuring and comforting that God is that close, taking care of us out of his love for us. *What great nation is there that has its gods so near as the Lord our God is to us whenever we call to him? (Dt 4 v 7) Nothing is hidden from the Lord; even our inmost secret thoughts are ever-present to him. Whatever we do, then, let it be done as though he himself were dwelling within us... for, in fact, that is literally the case; and in proportion as we rightly love him, so it will become clear to our eyes.*²

While it is true, then, that we can't hide from God, why would we want to? Just as we hope and believe that he is with us every step of the way in situations where we need his presence, he is actually that close to us all the time - it's just that we forget. That sort of "selective amnesia" can be very convenient on those occasions when do or say something we shouldn't. We pretend God won't know until we tell him but, of course, he does know. It would be far better to seek his help at the moment of temptation and make better choices than thinking we can always put things right later if we get caught. We are already caught, but because we know we can get away with it with people, we think we can get away with it with God as well, but we can't

Fear can often be the stumbling block. In the Book of Genesis (18 v 1-15), Abraham and Sarah had had no children and he was a hundred and she was ninety. One day three messengers from God mysteriously appear and assure Abraham that Sarah will give birth to a child. Sarah overhears the conversation and laughs, but when asked why she had laughed, she denies it. She had been put on the spot by the messenger – by God in fact – and in her fear found it easier to lie than to tell the truth. And then there was St Peter warming himself by the fire after Our Lord's arrest and being accused of knowing Jesus, even of being one of his followers. In his fear he denies knowing Jesus. The gospel doesn't say that Jesus overheard what Peter said – he didn't need to, as God he

² St Ignatius of Antioch

knew. He simply looked straight at him as the cock crowed and in that instant the full realisation of what he had done dawns on Peter.

As we know only too well, in our humanness it is very easy for us to react to being put on the spot in the same way Sarah and Peter did. It seems to happen before we can stop ourselves; fear clouds our judgment. The untruths or the denials trip off our tongue and, while it may get us out of the tricky situation we have got ourselves into, it creates an even trickier situation with God. We may even know we are acting against God's law but think that he won't notice but, of course, he does. We are thereby doing ourselves a very real disservice because not only are we denying ourselves a better relationship with God, but in the meantime we may not be in quite the state of grace that we should be. In that regard a good act of contrition and even the sacrament of reconciliation are always at our disposal, or, again, are we hiding our heads convincing ourselves that things aren't that bad, perhaps not even bad at all? Do we need to hear the cock crow first or wait for that look in Our Lord's eyes?

What should be a cause of concern is the fact (and the danger) that we are treating God as we treat other people, thinking that because we can fool some of the people some of the time, we can pull the wool over God's eyes too. We have to judge, in fact *pre-judge*, our thoughts and decisions and actions by a far higher standard, which is where our conscience comes in. It's that *Jiminy Cricket* figure standing on our shoulder, that small voice – which, of course, is actually God's voice - constantly calling us to what is right and away from what is wrong. We know very well, and realise very quickly, when we haven't listened to that voice, and no amount of hiding our head in the sand is going to change the situation. That is the point at which we need to stop, admit our mistake and set about putting things right, turning to the very thing we were trying to hide from: the God who loves us, seeking his forgiveness and help.³ In the words of St Francis de Sales: *Precious stones of all kinds when steeped in honey become more brilliant thereby.*⁴

We started out with bees and we end with honey – what could be better.

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³ which is precisely the process that unfolds in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15 v 11-32)

⁴ from his *Introduction to the Devout Life*