'A PROFITABLE PENANCE'

Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and David Jones's Engravings

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TRUE PENANCE is a lifelong undertaking, not a short-term response. Whether the offence committed caused grave damage or was just a minor hurt, the words of apology and absolution that follow are by no means the entire story. There is a clear beginning to the narrative of repentance: the recognition that a sin has been committed and a total acceptance of responsibility. There is a middle: an honest confession and request for forgiveness (which may or may not be granted). But what then follows—the repairing of damaged relationships and the restoration of trust—is not a quick and definitive end to the story, an effortless happy-ever-after. The narrative must continue to the ultimate stage of penance, which is conversion—a change of heart and mind which is unending. The story of repentance comes in instalments and each one says '*To be continued*'.

Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is a dramatic account of a journey from crime to contrition, to confession and finally to conversion. Like all great works of the imagination, the *Rime* is open to many levels of interpretation. The more one reads and ponders it, the more fascinating is the visionary truth it reveals. It was not well served by its contemporary readers, and many since have regarded it as undoubtedly a masterpiece but a flawed one—a rambling tale of superstition and guilt. Tamed into a classic, it can be found in every reputable anthology, including *Palgrave's Golden Treasury*, the one book that the young soldier David Jones took with him into the trenches of the First World War.

In the late 1920s, when David Jones was established as a wood-engraver—probably the best of his generation—he received a commission to produce ten copper-plate engravings as illustrations for *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Metal was a new medium for him, and so he felt a twofold diffidence in approaching the task. Writing about the commission

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some years later, he recalled his pleasure in being given the opportunity of illustrating a work that had long meant so much to him, but he also felt 'a painful sense of inadequacy', since he regarded *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as 'one of the great achievements of English poetry'. The second cause for diffidence was the technical one of being 'a novice in the very different craft' of copper-engraving.[1] He resolved this by deciding to avoid anything elaborate and keeping the lines very simple.

The result is a series of pictures of a remarkably austere beauty. A set of prints from the limited first edition is now a valuable collector's item. One such set (not quite complete, since it is missing the small head-piece and tail-piece) can be found in Campion Hall, Oxford. The eight surviving prints, which 'tell' the story, are beautifully positioned over the twin fire-places in the common room, and are like miniature Stations of the Cross. As with the Stations, they both select from and add to the original story. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is a story within a story: so, the six central prints focus on the mariner's tale of crime and punishment, while the two outer prints set it in another, happier story, which provides a context of grace and forgiveness. When he began the engravings, Jones was not yet writing poetry himself, but

[1] David Jones, 'An Introduction to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*', in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, edited by Thomas Dilworth, illustrated and introduced by David Jones (London: Enitharmon Press, 2005), 13.

it was as if this work released a spring already within him, for as soon as he had finished it, he began his own remarkable prose-poem about the Great War, 'In Parenthesis'.

As an artist, David Jones was alive to Coleridge's powerful visual imagery and, as a recent convert to Roman Catholicism, he was especially responsive to the religious symbolism that runs throughout the poem. With an artist's eye, he was able to see the symmetry and unity in the narrative and to portray this in his own illustrations; and as one who, in adulthood, had studied and been convinced by the sacramental life of the Church, he could also recognise in the poem a theologically coherent story of sin, penance and redemption.

The Sin

The Mariner's sin was an act of cruelty: the killing of an albatross. But the deed is at once recognised by both Mariner and crew as 'a hellish thing':[2] something more than the killing of a bird, just as the sin in Eden is something more than the eating of an apple. Very early in the poem, before its death, the albatross is seen as a Christ-figure: its winged arrival from another world, through the fog, brought joy to the mariners, who 'hailed it in God's name' (l. 66). Guiding them out of danger, it remained with them in a fellowship that was felt to be almost holy: 'It perched for vespers nine' (l. 76), until with appalling suddenness it is killed by a single bolt from the Mariner's crossbow. There is no explanation for the deed. It seems simply a casual abuse of power: he killed the bird because he could. But, like Adam and Eve in the story of the Fall, the Mariner immediately senses that he has done something much worse than he had intended, though he does not yet understand the full evil of his deed. Understanding only comes later, after much suffering. When he is lying in a half-trance, he hears two spirits discussing his sin and the vengeance that pursues him:

> 'Is it he?' quoth one, 'Is this the man?
> By him who died on cross,
> With his cruel bow he laid full low,
> *The harmless Albatross*.
>
> The spirit who bideth by himself
> In the land of mist and snow,
> *He loved the bird that loved the man*
> *Who shot him with his bow*.' (ll. 398–405, my italics)

[2] Coleridge, *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, edited by Dilworth, line 91. Subsequent references in the text.

The sin is then seen for what it really is: a betrayal of trust and love, and the spilling of innocent blood. The harmlessness and vulnerability of the albatross, and the trusting way in which it had come daily to the call of the mariners, makes its death an act of treachery as well as cruelty.

The sin does not stop with the Mariner. The crew members are immediately implicated in the crime by their reactions to it: first they condemn and then excuse and, in each case, they respond out of a selfish concern for their own survival and that of their ship, and not out of outrage at the taking of innocent life. (As we know all too well, this is a common response when a crime has been made public or when the victim of a crime is claiming justice, and when the consequences threaten more powerful individuals or organizations.)

In his illustrations, David Jones emphasizes the Christian symbolism of the tale. The cross can be seen everywhere in the six central engravings: in the masts, in the rigging, in the cruciform figure of the albatross transfixed with the Mariner's bolt and, most of all, in the figure of the Mariner himself, after the crew, in angry condemnation, had hung the dead bird around his neck.

The Penalty

The penalty that falls first on the Mariner, and then on the entire crew, is swift and terrible. The Mariner, aware of the horror of his deed, does not try to excuse himself or blame others. Like Peter after the cock crew, he immediately recognises his sin, and so his redemption begins here. (This is very important in a theological reading of the poem, because the honesty and humility implicit at this point allows him later to respond to what St Ignatius calls an 'opportunity of grace'.) The overwhelming experience for all the crew, but especially for the Mariner, is a sense of alienation from the natural world. This is dramatically conveyed in the terrible thirst that afflicts them all and which leads to a delirious perception of their surroundings:

> The very deep did rot: O Christ!
> That ever this should be!
> Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs
> Upon the slimy sea. (ll. 123–126)

In this nightmare world they have a vision of a phantom ship which seals the fate of both Mariner and crew. His companions will all die

Engraving 2 from **The Rime of the Ancient Mariner***, by David Jones*

and he alone will survive, unable to die. For the Mariner, with the dead bird hanging round his neck, his sin is ever before him; and as one by one, his companions drop down dead, each death accuses him:

> And every soul, it passed me by,
> Like the whiz of my cross-bow! (ll. 222–223)

Surrounded by the dead crew, he is forced to live through an experience of something very close to hell—he is utterly alone, unloving and unloved.

> Alone, alone, all, all alone,
> Alone on a wide, wide sea!
> And never a saint took pity on
> My soul in agony. (ll. 232–235)

He suffers a despair like that of Judas at the wrong he has done. Although full of remorse, he is still far from true contrition and penance.

> I looked to Heaven, and tried to pray;
> But or ever a prayer had gusht,
> A wicked whisper came, and made
> My heart as dry as dust. (ll. 244–247)

The Penance

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner is often regarded as one of those tales in which the central character lives forever under a curse, a guilt-ridden figure, like the Flying Dutchman or the Wandering Jew, obliged to repeat the same action over and over again without progression or any possibility of relief. This is a very partial reading which overlooks the entire final section of the poem. When the spirit speaks about him, saying, 'The man hath penance done / And penance more must do' (ll. 408–409), he is describing two different kinds of penance: one exterior, in the physical and psychological sufferings he lives through as the sole survivor of the crew; and the other a much more significant interior penance when, through grace, he undergoes a total change of heart. The Mariner has already, to some extent, done penance by acknowledging his sin without excuse or blame, and this allows him, after a period of lonely agony, to be receptive to that 'opportunity of grace' mentioned earlier.

Through grace, he undergoes a total change of heart

It is highly unlikely that Coleridge had read the *Spiritual Exercises*, but there is a remarkable parallel between the 'exclamation of wonder' described by Ignatius in the Second Exercise of the First Week …

> Point 5 Exclamations of wonder, with intense feeling, as I reflect on the whole range of created beings, how ever they have let me live and kept me alive! …. How have the saints been able to intercede and pray for me! (Exx 60)

… and the Mariner's response to the beauty he now sees in what had previously repelled him:

> O happy living things! no tongue
> Their beauty may declare:
> A spring of love gushed from my heart,
> And I blessed them unaware:
> Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
> And I blessed them unaware. (ll. 282–287)

Michael Ivens, in *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises*, comments on the fifth point:

> The fifth point. An exclamation of wonder. It has been observed that the sense of unworthiness in the presence of creation itself, even indeed of physical nature, is characteristic of the incipient mystic …. If one can allow even nature (which does not sin) to make one conscious of one's sinfulness, nature itself will proclaim God's mercy and faithfulness. A literally wonderful sign of these is the simple fact that one is alive and has creation at one's service. In this final point, with its mood of wonder and 'intense affection', the exercitant is already moving towards the concluding prayer of gratitude.[3]

In what follows in the poem, it is possible to see the 'incipient mystic' in the Mariner, rather than an accursed figure. 'Grace creates new capacities' and, by the end of the poem, the Mariner will be a changed man with his own special mission.[4] But first, there must be the journey home.

The homecoming of the doomed ship is very unlike its departure, when 'the ship was cheered' and they 'merrily' set off (ll. 21, 22). The returning Mariner and his ship are objects of terror to those who rescue him before the ship sinks. The last of the six central engravings that Jones made, depicting the ship's return, almost seems alive—everything is in violent motion—the heaving timbers, the tattered sails, the corpses of the crew tumbling around the deck—while the Mariner himself seems to hang from the rigging as if crucified, with arms reaching upwards,

[3] Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1998), 57.
[4] Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises*, 13.

Engraving 7, from **The Rime of the Ancient Mariner***, by David Jones*

as on a Jansenist cross;[5] but, strangely, as a sign of his new grace and linking him with Christ, his fingers are extended in blessing, as on an icon. It is an apocalyptic scene: devastation alongside benediction.

[5] In Part I of *In Parenthesis* (London: Faber, 1963), 169, David Jones describes surrendering German soldiers as looking like the Christ-figure on a Jansenist cross: 'a dozen of them walked toward us, they come in file, their lifted arms like Jansenist Redeemers, who would save, at least, themselves'. There is a fine example of a Jansenist crucifix in Campion Hall.

Once on dry land, the Mariner begs a hermit to give him the absolution he longs for. There is no lingering over this; in fact, after the physical rescue of the Mariner, the Hermit seems almost redundant. There is no mention of a penance imposed by the priest; instead, the Mariner tells of a penitential act that he is mysteriously obliged at times to carry out and which arises from a deep sense of remorse—when 'This heart within me burns' (l.585)—even though the sin has been fully confessed and absolved. In addition to bringing about an inner healing, the recurrent telling of his tale repairs the damage done to the natural order of which his victim was part, and is a lesson to others. Such penance is akin to the Rites of Reconciliation we had until recently, in that it takes into account what James Crichton refers to as 'the social dimension of sin'.[6]

An Aside on the Penitential Rite: 'The Mystery of Reconciliation'

The old *Penny Catechism* gave Contrition, Confession and Satisfaction as requirements for what was, in those days, simply called 'Confession', and the emphasis did indeed fall on the element of confession to a priest. With regard to Contrition, there was little more than pious exhortation, and hardly any attention at all was given to Satisfaction, either as to what it meant or what it entailed. There was no suggestion that it had anything to do with reconciliation. The preparation of children for the sacraments of Holy Communion and Confession was mainly concerned with the mechanics of receiving the sacred host in the mouth and negotiating the physical problems of a pitch-dark confessional box. In my own experience, I still remember the gentleness and reverence of the teaching I received for my First Communion, but Confession was a very different matter. The process of examination of conscience was a narrow, legalistic one and the subsequent confession a listing of rules habitually broken. In those days, I never questioned the fortnightly ritual of trotting out the same old 'sins' and receiving the same old penance, but I certainly did not have the sense of liberation and renewal that G. K. Chesterton describes in his *Autobiography*:

[6] James Crichton, 'Penance', in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, edited by Adrian Hastings (Oxford: OUP, 2000), 529.

> When a Catholic comes from confession he does truly, by definition, step out into that dawn of his own beginning …. In that brief ritual, God has really remade him in His own image. He may be grey and gouty, but he is only five minutes old.[7]

Still less did I feel like 'a trillion bucks' as I recently read someone describe the experience![8] Clearly, I had an underdeveloped sense of what constituted both sin and penance, but I suspect that this was true for many others. It was only as an adult, when I faced the incredulity of non-Catholic friends, that I had to try to find some kind of explanation for what happens in Confession. My friends seemed able to entertain two common, but somewhat contradictory, beliefs about Catholics and confession: (i) that it loaded them with guilt because they were forever having to think about sin, and (ii) that it gave them licence to go on sinning since they could so easily have their slates wiped clean.

It was only with the introduction of the Rite of Penance, which allowed for general absolution, that the communal nature of sin and repentance came home to me. James Crichton writes on the Order of Penance (1973):

> … it emphasises the power of God's word to bring about repentance and reconciliation with God, the church, and neighbour. The sinner is restored to union with God and communion with the church which he has wounded by his sins.[9]

General absolution relieved me of the burden of struggling to articulate what I had already inwardly acknowledged, and in a way that did not sound glib or self-absorbed.

The current practice of having a general liturgy followed by individual confession and absolution seems to me an unsuccessful attempt to combine the communal and the private, to the detriment of both: the communal element seems a pious prelude (like the carol-singing before Midnight Mass), while the individual confession must necessarily be a hasty one, with the penitent all too conscious of the long queues of fellow-penitents waiting their turn. Private confession, of course, is an

[7] G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson, 1952), 329–330.
[8] Tracy Tucciarone, 'The Sacrament of Penance', at http://www.fisheaters.com/penance.html, accessed 11 September 2012.
[9] Crichton, 'Penance', 529.

invaluable resource for the deeply troubled or for those in need of guidance, and it should always be available. However, it is a great misfortune that the liturgy with general absolution has now been proscribed, since as Crichton remarks,

> It is all of a piece: prayer, song, scripture reading, all lead straight to the general confession and absolution/reconciliation …. The new Order has retrieved the sense of community, emphasising reconciliation with God, the church, and fellow human beings.[10]

Back to the Mariner

Now the Mariner must travel from land to land, and his role is evangelical. Like the first disciples, he has 'strange power of speech'; he recognises those who will be receptive to his story and 'to them my tale I teach' (ll. 587, 590). And so the story of sin and punishment is set within another story of joy and celebration—a wedding feast, which the Mariner has interrupted to tell his tale. A wedding feast has much gospel resonance, and David Jones's two outer engravings, which enclose the tale itself, depict two very different bridal scenes, each with scriptural connotations. It was at a wedding feast in Cana of Galilee that Jesus was first seen in public in the 'goodly company' of his disciples; and, just as there is a mood of excitement in the gospel story, so the first engraving is exuberant, showing a glamorous bride and plumed gallants almost leaping into the church.

The story of sin and punishment is set within another story of joy and celebration

The final engraving is closer to the wedding feasts of the parables, or the heavenly Marriage Feast. It shows a gentler, humbler scene, with a priest censing the altar and the ordinary people, who bless themselves with holy water at the door, representing the faithful Church which is the bride of Christ. It is with this company that the Mariner now joins in prayer.

> O sweeter than the marriage feast,
> 'Tis sweeter far to me,
> To walk together to the kirk
> With a goodly company! —
> …

[10] Crichton, 'Penance', 529.

Engraving 8 from **The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,** *by David Jones*

> He prayeth best, who loveth best
> All things both great and small;
> For the dear God who loveth us,
> He made and loveth all. (ll. 601–604, 614–617)

Here is a redeemed figure, united once more with God and with the whole of Creation.

Lifelong Penance

The Mariner's recurrent telling of his tale could be compared to the practice of the Examen within the Spiritual Exercises, which has the effect of 'opening the exercitant's eyes to know the sins of his or her past life' and 'facilitates the process of liberation *which must continue through life*' (my italics).[11] His tale might also be compared to a General Confession, in that he tells it at what will be 'threshold moments' for himself and for those he meets 'when one is especially moved by God to inaugurate a new life' and when it will provide,

> … a deepening insight into what God has forgiven; a sense of reconciliation, not only as a present event, but as the history of God's constancy and fidelity; and a commitment of one's whole future to Christ made purer and more steadfast by a new repudiation in regard to past sin.[12]

This is where the Ancient Mariner stands at the end of the poem. As Julian of Norwich puts it: his 'whole life is a profitable penance'.[13] And the one who has listened to him is 'a sadder and a wiser man' (l.624).

The Rime*—A Parable That Has Meaning Today*

The killing of the albatross is symbolic of the evil in our world: all sin causes suffering. It is often an abuse of power and a betrayal of trust and innocence, and the damage done can last a lifetime. Anyone who has had extensive surgery knows that, even after the wound heals, the scar tissue remains forever tender, and even a small jolt against it can bring sharp pain. This is also true when someone has been the victim of a grave sin; even if healing occurs, the memory of the wound remains in the scar tissue.

In the face of great evil, such as the sexual abuse scandal within the Church, the community in which the crime has occurred is likely to be tempted to behave like the Mariner's crew and focus on survival. The first response may be incredulity, followed by a charitable attempt to find psychological or social explanations to excuse the sinner. If that proves difficult or impossible, all too often those left to deal with the

[11] Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises*, 33.
[12] Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises*, 41.
[13] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 168.

consequences go into defensive mode (even while deploring the crime), or else they try to spread the blame. It is a very human response, but it prevents reconciliation.

In his letter to the Irish people, at a time when the entire nation was in a state of grief and shock, Pope Benedict made what I believe was a mistake by reminding his readers of all the good that their religious, both men and women, had done and were still doing, *before* he made his truly humble and moving apology.[14] If only he had made that first, he would have won such sympathy that he would hardly have needed to mention the other. And in his otherwise excellent book *Clericalism: The Death of Priesthood*, George Watson makes a similar misjudgment by blaming the laity at too early a stage for fostering clericalism by being too deferential to priests and religious.[15] Even if he is right about this, he would have done well to leave such spreading of the blame until *after* he had examined the reasons for clericalism within the priesthood itself. Both the Pope and George Watson are impressive academics and probably have much experience with the educated laity, but neither has had prolonged pastoral contact with the less educated laity, who far and away make up most of the body of the Church and who, in the past, were never taught to question or challenge. To blame them for the abuse of power by the clergy is rather like suggesting that slaves are complicit in their own captivity. Both misjudgments arise from a lack of personal experience, but also from unconscious defensiveness which blocks the message of compassion.

A more dangerous defensiveness is when those responsible for managing the reconciliation process begin to withdraw their sympathy in the face of more hostility than they can cope with, and begin to see themselves as the ones attacked. If there is to be reconciliation, the only true course of action is to forego confrontation and metaphorically to 'kiss the ground'—and the ground is dirty! There will be those, both the victims and their advocates, who are likely to resist even the most sincere apologies and call them hypocrisy. If this happens, it is even more necessary that the sin should remain the unavoidable focus of attention. Brendan Callaghan, in his article 'On Scandal and Scandals', says:

[14] See 'Pastoral Letter of the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI to the Catholics of Ireland', 19 March 2010, at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/letters/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20100319_church-ireland_en.html, accessed 10 September 2012.

[15] See George B. Watson, *Clericalism: The Death of Priesthood* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2008).

> The faces of this tragedy are always the faces of the hurt and betrayed children, and we must somehow find the courage neither to turn away from those faces nor to diminish what they show us of death and destruction.[16]

Commenting on the current inadequacy of the working structures of the whole church community to deal with such situations, he does, however, offer some hope of future good:

> But that these aspects of our life as the gathered community of Jesus have been found lacking, makes this moment of tragedy also a 'Kairos'—an 'opportunity of grace'.

Such grace could enable a converted and humbled Church to make a creative reparation and as 'the gathered community of Jesus' to grow again in love.

A Kairos

In *Revelations of Divine Love*, Dame Julian asks Our Lord why God had not prevented sin, and she receives the strange reply that sin is 'behovely' (that is 'befitting' or necessary) but that 'all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well'.[17] And when she questions how all could be well, 'given the great harm that has been done to humankind by sin', the reply is that good can come out of evil, that some of the greatest saints are greater for having first been sinners.

In Matthew's Gospel (18: 21–22), Simon Peter asked 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?'—no doubt thinking he was being remarkably generous. With memorable exaggeration, Jesus replied: 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times'. If Peter had gone on to ask how long he should do penance for a sin against his brother, he would have received a similar uncompromising reply. In the post-resurrection story (John 21: 35–38), Peter is dismayed when the Lord asks him three times whether he loves him: surely one declaration should be enough. But Jesus' triple questioning echoes Peter's triple denial, and each increasingly distressed confirmation of Peter's love is part of his 'profitable

[16] Brendan Callaghan, 'On Scandals and Scandal', *Thinking Faith*, 24 April 2010, at http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20100415_1.htm, accessed 10 September 2012.
[17] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 79.

penance'. It is not likely that it stopped there. There must have been many occasions in the early days of a persecuted Church when faith or courage failed, and when Peter the fisherman, like the Ancient Mariner, told his own harrowing tale of cowardice and forgiveness to show the infinite mercy and goodness of God.

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