

Think about it! (7)

Well, we seem to have got over what used to be the taboo-subject: sex! Both in public and in private there are fewer and fewer people who don't feel able to talk about it – in fact it must be one of the most talked-about subjects! But that doesn't mean that there are no longer any taboos; no, yesterday's are exchanged for others – that's all. So what taboos are there now? One of them, no doubt, is the subject of death – we don't seem to find it easy talking about it, especially when the death in question happens to be our own!

Another taboo-subject nowadays is the subject of punishment; that's a word that you hear less and less, and people will do anything to find some other word to use in its place, as if it were under some kind of curse!: we talk about children being corrected; criminals need 'treatment' and 'rehabilitation' so that they can be 'reintegrated' in society; and as for unrepentant sinners, well, they get off scot-free (of course)! So what's the problem with the word 'punishment'? The 'modern' answer seems to be that punishment is some kind of cruel left-over from our primitive past that needs getting rid of as soon as possible.

But if that's the case, and if what criminals need (for example) is a kind of 'social healing', through a process of diagnosis, treatment, rehabilitation, recovery and reintegration, why can't it be possible, with the expert help of psychologists specializing in that area, and with the official stamp of approval of the corresponding authorities, to bring about in a matter of a few months, say, the 'healing' and return to normal life of serial killers?! I mean, if we're no longer talking about punishing people, but about healing them, why does that healing process have to take so many years?

But what needs to be absolutely clear is the fact that, from the Christian point of view, no matter people may think about other areas – children, criminals, etc. – without the concept of punishment, it's difficult to understand the good news that is supposed to be the essence of the Christian message. After all, what is the good news? We could sum it up by saying that God sent his Son to this world of ours to save sinners. But to save sinners from what exactly? Well, from the consequences of sin. And what are those consequences? Without doubt the most serious of all is what the Bible calls "eternal punishment" (that phrase, by the way, is found on the lips of Jesus himself – in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 25, verse 46). And how did the Son of God save sinners? There's more than one way of answering that question, but we find one of those ways in a classic prophetic passage in 'Isaiah' (53:5): "The punishment that brought us peace was upon him." What do these words of the great 'Evangelical' prophet mean? That the punishment required by the holy God's just law was applied to the Messiah, the Christ, so that those who actually deserved that punishment could be spared it. In other words, the only way in which you and I can be at peace with God and enjoy that peace is thanks to the one who was willing to take our place and receive in his own person our punishment – the punishment that was necessary in order for the just demands of God's law to be fully satisfied, and so that you and I could have peace, real peace. So it's true: "The punishment that brought us peace was upon him." Hallelujah!