

Omission – the Hardest of All

Things We Have left Undone

A while ago, I heard a story about a nineteenth-century bishop who was dying (well, I think he was a bishop), and who became greatly agitated; “But what is it, your Grace?”, his comforters asked him, “whatever can you have done, that you should fear meeting the Lord?” “It’s not what I have *done*, but what I *haven’t* done!” – came the reply. In the parable of the Sheep and Goats (St. Matthew 25, 31-46) people are condemned, not for anything they have done, but what they have failed to do. The problem with omission is that it is so open-ended; commission is much easier to cope with: identify what you shouldn’t be doing, and avoid it, or if you’ve failed to avoid it, confess it and seek absolution; “sorted!” as the young might say. Omission is not so amenable, since there are infinite amounts of sick, poor and prisoners, and if we tended some of them, or even many, there are still so many more whom we have ignored, while still securing a few nice things for ourselves.

And it is so easy to make excuses – the saddest fact of our secular/materialist society, I would argue, is that, for most people, in the absence of belief in moral laws descending from an objectively-existing Authority, there is a lot of self-justification going on. Creating arguments that seem, on the face of it, to *justify* what I happen to prefer for myself, or is most convenient for me, is a skill that so many people have today; indeed, we are able, easily, to justify the greatest horror ... And even Christians are often able to justify not giving money to beggars on our streets. “These people are just lazy, undeserving, and giving to them will just further deter them from seeking work; if the State gives to them, it is stealing (taxes) from people prepared to work, and giving it to the lazy; this is immoral” – that might be considered a “Right Wing” argument. “The more you give money to the destitute, the more you let the State get away with failing in its duty to provide for the needy, and the more you deter poor people from rising up against their oppressors; preventing the Revolution is an immoral act” – that might be considered a “Left Wing” argument (these involve appealing to the future - but a person such as you meet has probably been disabled from helping himself, paralysed by circumstances; his needs *now* must override any consideration of future solutions).

Then, there is the argument that claims that a sort of superior morality is necessary for beggars – but not us; the person who says: “He’ll only spend it on drink!” forgets that he himself likes a beer or two – why not? But most common is the situation of people being motivated not to give by the suspicion that they are being “had” by people who are simply milking them; “Surely *this particular* beggar was using a mobile phone a minute ago, and an Ipod ...” It may indeed be that one is being duped – but does that actually matter? After all, if you freely give, in innocence of the reality, then the Lord will know this, and you will be placed firmly with the sheep (if, in fact, the beggar *does* run a Porsche on your contributions, that does not affect your motivations; for once, intention, not effect, *is* morally important).

And who is the beggar? In the parable, the person in need is in place of Christ (I tried to illustrate this in my novel [Beyond This Wilderness](#), where Parson Evans attempts to aid a beggar, in eighteenth-century Lichfield (England), only to discover that he really *is* Christ; and later, the Lord comes to Evans’s aid just when he most needs it).

Certainly, if the parable is correct, if we freely give, the Lord will come to *our* aid when we most need it, ie. when the “sheep” and “goats” really are divided (I, for one, am very wary of suggesting that Jesus’s parable does not encapsulate the eternal truth of things). So exactly how would I have answered the bishop ...?