

ESAU

Sin

The subject of which I want to treat next is sin, the great evil of our race, and repentance, its only remedy. And I will take as my starting-point Esau, the grandson of Abraham, the elder son of Isaac. You will remember that St. Paul, in his epistle to the Romans, treats Esau and Jacob as typical, respectively, of nature and grace. Esau is the elder son by birth, but it is his younger brother, Jacob, who is to be the inheritor of the promises. And St. Paul, anxious to maintain the principle that God's election is free, that it is antecedent to all merit or demerit on our part, points out that in this case Jacob was preferred to Esau in a prophecy made before either of the two children was born, when they had done neither good nor evil. That is true, and a valuable lesson. But it is no less true that where God rejects, the ground of his rejection is to be sought, not in any want of love on his part, but in some shortcoming on the part of the soul that is rejected. Let us try, then, to trace Esau's character and career – very little is told us about either – and take warning for our own lives from the hints they give us.

I think most of us get the impression, in reading this history merely as a history, that Esau was badly treated. Certainly all schoolboys who are introduced to the facts go away with the firm conviction that Esau was a sportsman, that Jacob was a cad and a sneak. Esau, they learn, the elder twin, spent most of his time out hunting, and one day he returned all hot from the chase, before it was time for luncheon, to find Jacob making pottage. It was just what we should have expected of the two brothers, that Esau should go out after a stag, and Jacob should stay at home making soup. Esau, very naturally, wants to share the pottage; Jacob consents, but only on a condition – what a condition! He must have Esau's birthright, take over the whole right of inheritance, in return for a single meal! Esau is so hot and hungry that he consents. Later, he incurs the displeasure of his father and mother, especially of his mother, by marrying foreign wives. And then, the last scene; Isaac, old and nearly blind, sends Esau out to find venison for him; when he comes back with it, he shall receive his father's blessing, such as the first born has the right to expect. While he is away the mother, Rebecca, persuades Jacob to dress up and impersonate his elder brother; she cooks a kid so as to make it taste like venison; and Jacob, by a piece of deception accompanied by several hearty lies, passes himself off as Esau, receiving the blessing in his stead. When the real Esau comes back with the real venison, it is apparently too late; Isaac is unable to retract the blessing he has once pronounced, and Jacob is destined to inherit the divine promises instead of Esau. Is this, after all, a very edifying story to tell the young? What estimate will they form of Jacob, founder of the Jewish fortunes? What impression will they get of the justice of God in allowing Jacob and Rebecca to get away with their conspiracy, and influence the whole course of future history by a fraud?

Now I believe the real answer to that, and I hope all the Fathers of the Church will forgive me when I say so, is that we are not expected to admire the conduct of Jacob, or the conduct of Rebecca, in the least. They acted treacherously, and from selfish motives in the main; there is

really no getting away from that. But that is not the point; the story here is the tragedy of Esau, and the behavior of the other actors in the story, Rebecca with her duplicity, Jacob with his lies, Isaac with his senile stupidity, only serves to help Esau on towards his appointed destiny, the destiny which his character and his attitude alike foreshadowed. I do not think we are even meant to disapprove of Esau, up to a point. It is surely best to read the whole story not as a kind of moral fable, a cautionary tale for the young, but as a tragedy; and it would not be a tragedy if there were nothing fine, nothing admirable about the central figure. A noble character, with one fault which ruins it – that, after all, is the essence of tragedy; Hamlet with his indecision, Othello with his suspicious temper, Lear with his craving for human sympathy, and so on. And I think we are quite at liberty to regard Esau as a fine fellow if we will; impulsive, generous, a little stupid, quite unsuspecting, easily angered, but making up for it on the whole by readiness to forgive; hardly treated by circumstances, and managing to carry it off well. Only there must be something wrong with his character; what is it? We will not take the risk of putting our own construction on the story; we will go to the New Testament, and find the key to Esau in the epistle to the Hebrews.

“Take good care,” says the apostle, “that none of you is false to God’s grace, that no poisonous shoot is allowed to spring up, and contaminate many of you by its influence. None of you must be guilty of fornication, none of you earthly-minded, as Esau was, when he sold his birthright for a single dish of food; afterwards, you may be sure, he was eager enough to have the blessing allotted to him, but no, he was rejected. He pleaded for it in tears, but no second chance was given him.” St. Paul, you see, regards Esau as typical of infidelity to grace, which poisons the springs of a naturally fine character; it results in profanity, in a light and careless attitude towards our eternal salvation, that may end in irreparable ruin. For one dish of food he sold his birthright – that is the precise sin of Esau. Here is a man called, if he will, to inherit the promises made to Abraham and Isaac; the hopes of a great nation that is one day to be, mysterious hopes of still further privileges yet unrevealed. For that hope, Abraham had left his country and his father’s house; for that hope, he and his son Isaac had been content to live as wanderers and strangers in a foreign country, keeping alive the purity of their stock and the sacredness of their traditions. All this awaited Esau, if he would; and he? He is ready to barter it all away in a moment, because he is in too much of a hurry to wait half an hour for a meal. That is Act I of the tragedy; it gives you Esau’s character, and shews how little likely he is to become the founder of a great kingdom. There is nothing much wrong with him, you see, nothing positive wrong with him; he is a careless sort of person, that’s all. But the careless attitude which he shews on this occasion gives you the key to his character; you can see what is going to happen when the root of bitterness grows up.

Act II is the part of the tragedy which we are apt to overlook because it is given so shortly; it is a mere genealogical record. “Esau, who was by this time forty years old, married two wives, Judith the daughter of Beeri, the Hethite, and Basemath, the daughter of another Hethite, Elon. Both of these distressed the hearts of Isaac and Rebecca.” In those simple words lies the essence of the

tragedy. All this trouble taken when Isaac grew up to find a wife within the clan, to preserve the purity of Abraham's race; and so far as Esau cares it may be thrown to the winds. He cannot be bothered to go back to the home of his fathers for a wife. So far as lies in him, he deliberately breaks the tradition and forfeits the promises for the sake of some desert women who have taken his fancy. So he becomes the father of the tribe of Edom, that indomitable but ineffective tribe which gave Israel so much trouble in later years. And he leaves it to Jacob to marry inside the clan if he will, to become the father of a chosen race.

And then, such is the shiftlessness of his nature, he forgets all about it. He think – that is Act III – that he will be able to inherit the blessing due to the first-born, although he has deliberately forgone his right to such a title. He will just go out and shoot a stag, and bring the venison home; the old man will be sure to come round all right; he was always fond of venison ... That is the tragedy, that it is already too late, and Esau does not realize it. Does not realize it, until he comes home and hears of the family conspiracy which has robbed him of his blessing. Then he breaks into tears, "Thy blessing, father, for me too thy blessing!" But the word has been spoken, and there is no retracting it; the younger is to have dominion over the elder, for all time.

Lest any man be wanting to the grace of God – that grace is our birthright, the most precious thing we can ever possess. This and that he wants us to do, and gives us the grace we need for it; infidelity to such grace is selling our birthright. How much more, when we consent to mortal sin? When we have to choose between the mess of pottage, the gratification of sense or of nature, on the one hand, and the gift of sanctifying grace on the other? When we deliberately turn our backs on the Creator, and prefer the creature? Ah, what a root of bitterness springs up, to hinder every capacity for good, and to defile our whole being!

To offend Almighty God by sin is to sell our birthright as men. Man is the first-born of creation, although not in the order of time. Whether we take the first chapter of Genesis, or the speculations of scientists, for our guide, we have to recognize that the last in the order of time is first in order of importance. The last species, it would seem, to appear on earth, man, is self-evidently, the crown of all that work of creation. We are God's viceroys; we enjoy dominion over the fowls of the air and the beasts of the field because God has entrusted it to us. Our empire, then, is bound up with his, stands or falls with his. What should we think of an eldest son, the heir to his father's property, who should deny his father's right to the property and favour the pretensions of some other claimant? Yet that is what we do when we offend God by our sins. We behave as if the moral laws which he has enjoined on us were not there. And to quarrel with one set of God's laws is to quarrel with his whole policy in dealing with his creation; we wish him dethroned; we are like the citizens in the parable who said, "We will not have this man to reign over us". And in dethroning God we are dethroning ourselves; we are gainsaying our right to be what we are, the lords of his creation. For a moment's pleasure, for the gratification of some trumpery spite, we are prepared, as far as in us lies, to pull down the whole edifice of God's sovereignty, and ourselves with it.

To offend Almighty God by sin is to sell our birthright as Christians. For as Christians we have an infinitely higher birthright; we are the sons of God and the heirs of eternal life. God has shewn us such mercy that we should not merely be call but *be* his sons. He would not suffer us to enjoy heaven as mere pensioners; he would not even give us a legal title through some form of fictitious adoption. No, he *made* us his sons; and how? By incorporating us, through baptism, into the Sacred Humanity of Jesus Christ. To cut ourselves off from sanctifying grace by mortal sin is to lose our Lord's friendship, and with his friendship God's sonship, it may be, never to be restored. And we do that lightly, with the defiant bravado of Esau neglecting his parents' wishes. We behave as if we wished the Incarnation had never happened. Even our venial sins, when they are deliberate, have something of this quality; we are like children looking out from the windows of our father's house and wishing ourselves back in the gutter. Sons of God, and joint heirs with Christ, ransomed with his Blood; and we – there is the mess of pottage steaming and tempting under our nostrils, and we say, with Esau, Oh, very well ...

To offend Almighty God by sin is, for us priests, to sell our birthright as priests. Jacob had twelve sons, from whom were descended the twelve tribes of Israel. To each of these a portion of territory was assigned, after the conquest of Chanaan, to cultivate it and make the best of it they could. But the tribe of Levi, the priestly tribe, had no such burden of cultivation entrusted to it; their brethren of the remaining tribes allotted to them forty-eight cities with their suburbs, whose revenues they were to enjoy in perpetuity. So in the Christian Church the priesthood is exempted from the daily care with which others have to provide their daily bread; the faithful undertake, and acknowledge, the duty of supporting their pastors. It is our birthright, then, to be emancipated from its temptations – from its ambitions, its strivings, its cravings, to live beyond the reach of all distractions that might mar our holiness. When your average Englishman says, as he is apt to do, that the parsons have to be good because they are paid to, he is giving inelegant expression to an important truth. The Catholic laity do treat us as a caste set apart for holiness to the Lord; they bear witness to that by a hundred delicate little attentions which tradition dictates – the priest must pass first through a door, you must take off your hat to him, you must make little presents to him on this or that occasion; we are “holy people”. In the days of persecution, when Catholics used a kind of cipher language among themselves, the priest was always referred to as “the good man”; I wish they did that still, to remind us of what we ought to be.

What, then, if Levi imitates Esau, and prefers the pottage of worldliness to his own sacerdotal birthright? What if he, whose holy calling obliges him to abstain from the very appearance of evil, and detaches him from the worldly cares and pleasures which might be an occasion of sin to him, breaks through all those safeguards and sins against God? Scandal in a priest is hardly less than a fault against human justice. And even the secret sins of a priest, what terrible irony there is in the very thought of them! The Lord himself is the portion of our inheritance; he gives himself into our hands – shall those hands turn against him? No, no; if the thought of our human birthright cannot deter us from conspiring against God's government of the world, if the thought of our Christian birthright cannot deter us from endangering our position as sons in our Father's

house, at least shame ought to prevent us from giving reality to that monstrous conception, a priest in sin!

Esau found no place for repentance, though with tears he had sought it. The soul which cuts itself off from sanctifying grace by mortal sin cannot expect, as a right, that it will ever be restored to the divine favour. It must not think, like Esau, to placate God's anger by doing him some little service later on. He seeks us, not ours. We depend on him for the precious moments of life which may be given us to repent in; we depend on him for the impulse of actual grace which elicits from us, now incapable of all supernatural initiative, the contrition which alone can make that pardon ours. Unavailing tears, like those of Esau over his lost sonship, like those of Saul over his lost kingship, like those of Judas over his lost apostleship – so our tears would be, but for God's mercy; will be if we play with that mercy once too often.

And yet, if I ended there, you would have good reason to accuse me of having drawn only one side of the picture, of having exalted God's justice at the expense of his mercies. It is dangerous to do that; there is the danger that we shall despair over our own sins, there is danger that we shall be hard and unforgiving towards the sins of others. The Jews, who had only the Old Testament to enlighten them, were themselves hard and unforgiving towards the shortcomings of their Gentile neighbors, of whom the Edomites, the descendants of Esau, were their favorite type. Our Lord laid his finger on that weakness of theirs by telling them a story which stand out amongst the famous literature of the world, distinguished by its delicate irony and its tender compassion for the weakness of human kind.

A certain man had two sons – why, this is to be the story of Esau and Jacob over again! The elder son, representing the wicked Gentiles, will throw away his inheritance, and the younger son, representing as always the Jewish people, will become the heir instead. So the Jews think, and settle down to listen to our Lord's parable with pleasurable anticipation. "And the younger of them said to his father ..." What's that? The younger? Here, stop! Something has gone wrong with the parable! Yes, a great deal has gone wrong; and as the story of the Prodigal Son develops we find that it is the story of Esau and Jacob deliberately told the wrong way round from beginning to end. It is the elder son this time who represents the Jews, the younger the Gentiles. It is the younger son who throws away the patrimony that should be coming to him; throws it away with a carelessness which is a repetition, which is surely meant to be a repetition, of Esau's carelessness. And this time the prodigal does find a place for repentance, because with tears he seeks it; and the moral of the story is against the stay-at-home son, instead of being in his favour.

Yes, there is no doubt that we can trace Esau's character in the younger son; the light-hearted, ungrateful way in which he demands, as of right, payment of the money that will be coming to him one day, and goes off with it to make his fortune; then, in a far country, sells his birthright for a mess of pottage, enslaves himself to a foreign master, and forgets the traditions of his home. Some day, perhaps, something will turn up, and he will be able to go home and make it up with them all; meanwhile, here is the pig-sty. In all that he is like Esau, and you would think that like

Esau he was too late; that he had gone too far, now, for any salutary influence to touch him; he can find no place for repentance now. And then, suddenly, he returns to himself; in a gracious moment of homesickness, recollection comes to the prodigal. He will arise, and go to his father; he has nothing to take with him, no little peace-offering to make it all right again; he will go to his father and say, I have sinned. And while he was yet a great way off, his father met him. Salutory tears, like those which put away the sin of David, like those which restored Peter to his primacy among the apostles; even now it is not too late.

“But while he was still a long way off ‘ – God runs to meet us in absolution; he is more willing to forgive than we to ask forgiveness. And the pardon which he offers us is absolute pardon, not some pathetic second-best like the blessing which Isaac gave at last to his son Esau, but restitution in full; the best ring, the fatted calf. Terrified we approach him, begging for the least of his favours: “Hast thou only one blessing to give, father? I pray thee, bless me too.” And he? “It is fit that we should make merry and be glad; because this, my son, was dead and is come to life again; was lost, and is found.”

Ronald Knox, “A Retreat For Priests”