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Theology of human brokenness

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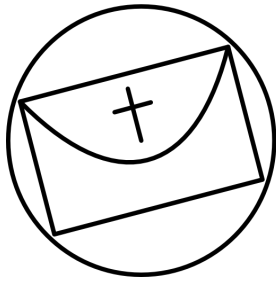
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Invited

2021 - 2025

Invited Season One – Transcript 2: Theology of Human Brokenness

Dr Pia Matthews is a senior lecturer at St Mary's University and was appointed an expert to the XIV Ordinary General Assembly Synod of Bishops in 2015. Pia talks to us about how, in a Christian context, human brokenness is always spoken of in the same breath as hope.

Hello, my name is Pia, and I want to take you on a deeper dive into the theology of human brokenness. The picture behind me is an altarpiece from Saint John's, the former seminary at Wonersh. I think it is beautiful, and so perhaps an odd place to start thinking about brokenness. I want to begin here, because in the Christian tradition, yes, we talk about brokenness, but brokenness is always spoken of in the same breath as hope. Why? Because human brokenness can never stop God from loving us, loving each one of us so much that he gave his only son to heal us, restore and redeem us and conquer all brokenness. So, starting with Jesus in the incarnation, the picture here of the angel Gabriel and Mary, when Mary says yes to becoming the mother of God, Jesus the second person of the trinity, he breaks into our world in a real physical way, and he takes his place among us in a broken world. Then Jesus' birth, the middle picture, Christmas. In the chaos and confusion of the forced movement of people, of migrants of political oppression, a young woman gives birth far from her home, her husband Joseph fails to find somewhere suitable for his wife. But it turns out to be truly fitting for the son of God to be born on straw. If God can be born in straw, he can be born in hearts that are broken. Often Christmas, the time for families, is a time of acute difficulty for people living in broken relationships. But every Christmas is a still and holy time, a rare moment of peace, of harmony, when the angels sing, and the lion lies down with the lamb. The coming of Jesus, true God and true man, is our hope in a broken world. In the Christian tradition, Jesus the redeemer is called the second Adam, Mary the second Eve and this points backwards to Genesis and the source of our brokenness.

The stories of creation and the fall in Genesis are symbolic stories, they explain deep truths. They are the word of God in human language. The first thing to note is that when God creates human beings, they are created good, in God's image. However broken we are, we are good, and we are loved. You may have realised that there are two accounts of the creation of human beings; Genesis 1 Verse 27: human beings made in God's image, and

Genesis 2: Adam made of the earth and Eve, flesh of his flesh. These different accounts were written at different times by different authors, but the final editor kept both accounts together because they each contribute to the richness and wonder of what it is to be human. As custodians of creation, Adam and Eve have a relationship of care for the world around them. As the early Church Fathers pointed out, it is fitting that human beings care for the environment, because human beings are both material and spiritual beings – we belong in the world, and we belong in heaven. We're a unity of body and soul. And then sharing a common human nature, Adam and Eve have a special relationship with each other, bone from my bone flesh from my flesh. Where each is at the same time unique and unrepeatable yet calls to form what Pope St John Paul II calls a communion of persons. Most significantly, made in the image and likeness of God, both Adam and Eve are in a particular relationship with God. In all these relationships, we're called to love, and human beings are free to accept or reject this call to love. Now we all know the story of the fall, God allows Adam and Eve to eat from all of the trees in the garden, but God forbids them from eating fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Now this prohibition feels like a limitation, especially since human beings always want to have more, to know more, and surely knowing good and evil is a good thing. But in the story the tree of knowledge is a symbol of the origin of ethical and religious values, by stealing (and this is what it is) from the tree, Adam and Eve wanted to be like God. They stopped trusting in God, they became ruled by pride, in effect, rather than accepting God as the source of knowledge of good and evil, and God communicates this knowledge to his children.

Human beings want to be the ones to decide what is good and evil. We want to live by our own self-determination. We want to make up the rules. We want to forget that we are dependent on God. Wanting to make up our own rules about things with no reference to wisdom, no reference to the givens of this world, above all no reference to God. Sounds familiar? It's the pride of human beings, and the result? A change, brokenness in every relationship. Hardship pain and toil, thorns and thistles in relation to the world, we tend to exploit the natural world and pollute our environment forgetting that the world is our home.

Shame, lust, and the search for power over each other, sin always crouching at the door, forgetting that the other person is a person like me and not an object for me. Even in our own selves we are, as St Augustine puts it, like a house divided. As St Paul says, we cannot seem to do the good we know we should do, and our relationship with God? The first sin, original sin, is not like a personal fault in us, nor does original sin totally corrupt human nature. We are still good. But it does mean that human nature is wounded, subject to ignorance, suffering, death and inclined to sin. We tend to choose all the things that distract us from God and the good. Now the first sin may have broken our relationship with God by depriving human beings of original holiness, but however frail, foolish, ungrateful human beings are, God does not abandon us. Throughout the Old Testament God is faithful to his people, he loves his people with a steadfast love, and he goes in search of them, to turn them back to him.

Let's return to our picture. By her yes to God's will, Mary, second Eve reversed the disobedience of the first Eve. In the Magnificat, Mary's song of praise in St Luke's Gospel,

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Mary proclaims the greatness of God who has done great things for her. She recognises her dependence on God the Almighty, who raises the lowly. In 1854 Pope Pius IX proclaimed what was part of church tradition, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. That from the moment of her conception, Mary was preserved from original sin, by a special grace from God and through the merit of her son. She is full of grace, truly blessed, and at the end of her earthly life (this is the picture on the far left) at the end of her earthly life she was taken body and soul into heaven as an anticipation of our own resurrection.

So, the incarnation, what's going on? Jesus is not simply God's Plan B, because human beings messed up his Plan A. Jesus is making all things new. In the Exsultet at the Easter Vigil, these words are sung "O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a redeemer". Human beings may have been created good, in the image of God with full human dignity, but through Jesus' life, passion, death and resurrection, we're not simply restored to Eden - we are forgiven, restored, redeemed, and raised to an even greater dignity. We are called sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, friends of God. Jesus has won the battle, he has conquered death, and that is why we cannot talk about human brokenness without talking about hope.

In the Gospels, we hear about Jesus acting in our broken world. We hear about the cosmic Christ who has the power to break the force of storms, who restores calm. Even the wind and waves obey him. Jesus breaks the power of evil over Peter, even devils fear him. And in the healing miracles Jesus heals people's personal brokenness. He forgives the sins of the paralytic man before restoring him to health, and to his friends. Finally, in the Eucharist and on the cross Jesus body is broken for us. We cannot imagine the humiliation and scandal of the cross because the cross is too familiar a sign for us, but for Jesus to die in this way for us, and for his disciples to proclaim the victory of the cross, means that every person, however marginalized or unworthy or broken, is worthy of love and respect. At Jesus death the veil of the sanctuary was torn in two, what separated broken human beings from the presence of the holy God has been torn down. The earth shook and rocks were split, even the very fabric of the world is affected. Tombs break open. The power of Jesus reaches into the grave. We know that Jesus instituted the sacrament of baptism to unite us with him. With him as the second Adam. In the sacrament of baptism, we truly die and rise to new life with Christ, this new life erases original sin and turns us back to God. However, as the early church fathers pointed out, sometimes it is hard to remember that Jesus has broken the power of sin and death, because we still seem to live in a broken world. Our new life can still be weakened and even lost by sin, just look around at sickness, death, plague and famine, war and violence, human inhumanity to other human beings, never mind my own personal failings! However, a light still shines through brokenness. Jesus the king has indeed fought and won the battle, but through the brokenness of the world we have the privilege of sharing in God's work. We too can work to build up the Kingdom of God. A kingdom of justice and love. And for example, Catholic social teaching gives us principles to help us in this work. With God's help we can work for the healing of each other, and of our home, the world our environment. As for our own brokenness Jesus also instituted the sacrament of penance as a path to new life, the sacrament of forgiveness, what the fathers of the church called the second plank of salvation after the shipwreck of a loss of grace.

We know that Jesus the good shepherd always goes in search of the lost sheep, but there is a problem in saying that we're all broken in some way, we're only human after all so don't blame us, blame weak human nature, it's just the way we are. Like the sheep I go astray, Jesus finds me, I go astray, Jesus fights, but I go astray, and so it goes on.

It is of course true that Jesus will always pick us up when we fall, but we also have to take brokenness seriously.

God wants broken hearts, not torn garments, because hard hearts are not open. God can work with soft hearts to set things right in us. Moreover, I think that taking the sting out of brokenness by saying that we're all broken, seems to trivialize how some people really feel. Well and truly broken. Now there are lots of testimonies from people who have really felt grace working through their brokenness, people who feel healed and put back into right relationships with themselves, with others and with God. We praise God. But not everyone feels this. This perhaps is especially the case for people who feel they do not have a place in the church community, perhaps they have separated themselves from the church or they feel marginalized, side-lined, or estranged from the Church, particularly from the Eucharist. And it is difficult to find a way back.

Again, let's return to Jesus, and in the middle of the picture near the bottom we have the cross. The Psalms remind us that the Lord is near to the broken-hearted. Jesus, the Good Samaritan who can bind up all our wounds, Jesus broken on the cross, still carries his wounds. He is what people call, the wounded healer. And Jesus' broken body laid in the tomb, lies there with those who feel their whole lives are also spent in the cold stone tomb. But they're not forgotten. In the sequence at Pentecost we pray, melt the frozen, warm the chill. The anonymous 14th century hymn 'Soul of my Saviour' has a lovely line, I think, and it goes like this "deep in thy wounds Lord hide and shelter me" the wounds of Christ and the Sacred Heart of Christ are deep enough to take all of our brokenness. We can pour into Christ's wounds all of our own sufferings and griefs pain pangs and deepest sadness. And more.

The 4th century scriptural theologian St Jerome had a reputation for being cantankerous and difficult. The story is told that when St Jerome met the child Jesus, Jerome said that he had given everything he had, his work, his possessions, his life to God. But the child Jesus said that he still wanted more. In exasperation Jerome said that all he had left was his misery, and Jesus replied that is what I want from you, your misery. The wounds and heart of Jesus can take our pain our misery our envy bitterness disappointment and resentment our despair our stresses and our exhaustion. Jesus, true man, understands the human heart, Jesus true God can not only mend what is broken, but he transforms everything we offer him. This hope that God can take and redeem all of our brokenness is not vague optimism or wishful thinking, it is a real and certain hope. As St Paul says, nothing can ever come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord.