The patriarch Jacob had several family problems. One was the rivalry between his wives, Leah and Rachel, and another was jealousy among his sons. Jacob himself was partly to blame. He treated Joseph, a son of his favourite wife Rachel as his favourite son, and this aroused the envy of the other brothers. Everybody has an in-built sense of justice, and quickly resents unequal treatment. It was not only the special coat that Jacob made for Joseph that caused his brothers’ jealousy. Joseph also inflamed it by telling them about his dreams. Even Jacob was annoyed by the suggestion that he, Joseph’s father, and Joseph’s mother and all his other brothers would one day bow down before him. When Joseph left his father’s protection, the jealous brothers first intended to kill him, but their mortal hatred was satisfied with selling him into slavery.

Jealousy is a powerful emotion. Solomon wrote, “Jealousy makes a man furious, and he will not spare when he takes revenge” (Prv 6:34). Jealousy is powerful in the love of man and woman. In the Song of Solomon the beloved asks her lover, “Set me like a seal on your heart, like a seal on your arm! For love is strong as death, and jealousy is as fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the LORD” (SSol 8:6).

The Law of Moses made special procedures for a husband to follow if he suspected that his wife had been unfaithful to him. A special grain offering had to be made. The priest took dust from the floor of the tabernacle and mixed it with water. The priest wrote curses on a scroll and washed them off into this “bitter water.” The priest asked the woman to bind herself with a curse, and when the woman drank the water, if she had been unfaithful, it would cause her bitter pain. The woman’s abdomen would swell, her thigh would waste away, and she would be accursed among her people (Nm 5:11-31). What a contrast to the public attitude today about many prominent people whose private morality is regarded as their own business!

In the original Hebrew and Greek “zealous” and “jealous” translate the same word. In human beings, the sense of zeal or ardour was not sinful, but was a splendid thing in the Macedonians, who rallied to the challenge of providing for poor Christians at Jerusalem, so that in spite of their own poverty, they gave beyond their means (2 Cor 9:2). When false apostles at Corinth threatened to attract Paul’s congregation away from him, he wrote, “I am jealous for you with the jealousy of God, because I have promised you in marriage to one Husband, to Christ, that I may present you as a pure virgin to Him (2 Cor 11:2). In Romans 9-11 Paul expresses his strong feelings for his own people Israel, the majority of whom had turned their backs on God’s Messiah. Their zeal for God was misplaced. Paul wrote, “I bear them witness that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge (Rm 10:2).

In human beings, jealousy is one of the sins of the sinful nature, which is opposed to the Spirit. If people live in jealousy without repentance, they will not inherit eternal life (Gal 5:19-21). It is a common sin in unspiritual people. Because Isaac owned flocks and herds, and had many servants the Philistines envied him (Gn 26:14).

It is for this reason that Christian people are strongly warned against envy and jealousy. Sarah was jealous of Hagar when Hagar became pregnant. Jealousy of Elkanah’s rival wife Peninnah caused Hannah bitter grief. One of the effects of the “evil spirit from the LORD was that Saul was increasingly obsessed with jealousy and suspicion of David (1 Sm 16:14), and persecuted him. Internal politics and family jealousy plagues the Maccabean revolt. In the family of Herod, murder, intrigue, and jealousy seriously weakened the Jewish state. Herod’s slaughter of the baby boys at Bethlehem was driven by jealousy about a rival king of the Jews. The elder brother in Jesus’ parable about the prodigal son resented the loving father’s kind treatment of his younger brother, and he gave no hint of a change in his attitude. He refused even to call him his brother. The Bible even has the expression “an evil eye” for malice, ill will, jealousy and envy. (Mt 6:23, Mk 7:22).

Jealousy is a sin that quickly disrupts the harmony of Christian congregations. Because of factions in the congregation at Corinth, Paul wrote, “You are still influenced by your sinful natures! For when there are jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not influenced by your sinful natures and living by human standards?” (1 Cor 3:3). When Paul wrote his second letter to the Corinthians he said that he planned to visit them again soon,
but added, “I am afraid that somehow, when I come, I shall not find you as I want you to be, and that you will not find me as you want me to be. I am afraid that somehow there will be quarrelling, jealousy, outbursts of wrath, instances of selfish ambition, of slander, of gossiping, of pride, and of disorderly conduct” (2 Cor 12:20). Because of the nearness of the end, Paul warned the Christians at Rome in particular against three pairs of dangerous sins. Jealousy one of the third pair: “Let us live decently as in the daytime, not carousing or getting drunk, not sinning sexually and living wildly, not quarrelling and being jealous.” (Rm 13:13). James, the brother of the Lord, warned Christian people, “If you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This ‘wisdom’ does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. For where there is jealousy and selfishness, disorder and every evil practice are there” (Jm 3:14-16).

The Bible has a great deal to say about God’s jealousy. It is not sin in Him, but an aspect of His holiness. The basic concept is His refusal to tolerate rivals. In this sense, God is a jealous God, who will not tolerate the worship of other gods (Ex 20:5, Dt 5:9). God’s jealousy safeguards His unique relationship with His people. He has an intense interest for His people’s honour and prosperity. The prophet Zechariah wrote, “Cry out, ‘This is what the LORD of hosts has said: “I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion. Zch. 1:14).’”

God’s jealousy is also a reason why people must be careful not to offend Him. It is a motive for His anger. In the Scriptures fire is often a symbol of destruction associated with God’s wrath and jealousy. “Jealousy” is also a term that refers to God’s unique relationship with His people. In his farewell speech Joshua challenged the Israelites against glib promises: “You cannot serve the LORD, because He is a holy God. He is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your” (Jos 24:19) At the time of Rehoboam, the people of Judah built high places, sacred stones, and Asherah posts for themselves on every high hill and under every leafy tree. There were even male cult prostitutes in the land. They engaged in all the same detestable practices as the nations that the LORD had driven out before the Israelites. The author of 1 Kings wrote: “They did what the LORD regarded as evil, and they stirred up His jealous anger more with their sins, which they had been committing, than anything that their fathers had done” (1 Kng 14:22).

All of this is very pertinent when many people today think that their religious faith and morality are all a matter of private choice. The Israelites were not to provoke God’s ‘jealous wrath by idolatry or sinful behaviour. The two books of Kings often say, “He did what was good / evil / in the sight of the LORD.” Evil was what He considered evil. Shortly before his death, Moses was told to write a special song to warn the Israelites. It included the verse: “They aroused Him to jealousy with foreign gods. They provoked Him to anger with detestable deities” (Deut 32:16). The psalmist asks, “How long, O LORD? Will You be angry for ever? Will Your jealousy keep on burning like fire? (Ps 79:5). When Paul warned the Christians at Corinth that they could not partake of the table of the Lord and of the table of demons, he asked, “Or are we trying to make the Lord jealous? We are not stronger than He is, are we? (1 Cor 10:22).

The remedy for sinful jealousy is God’s forgiveness for the sake of Jesus’ obedience in sinners’ place. So what is the virtue that Christian people ought to emulate and cultivate? It ought to be genuine joy about the achievements and successes of others. Because of the ravages of original sin, people are curved in on themselves, and such genuine joy does not come easily. Paul expressed this ideal when he wrote, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as being better than you are. Each of you should look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Plp 2:3-4).

In Philippians 2 Paul pointed to Jesus Christ, not merely as the great example, but, above all, as the motive and power for right attitudes. Jesus as a human being, deliberately refrained from exploiting the majesty that He possessed for His own glory and prestige. “Although He was in the form of God, yet He did not consider His equality with God as a prize to exploit. Instead, He emptied Himself, took on the form of a slave, and became like other human beings; and when He was found in the appearance of a human being, He humbled Himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. That is why God also has very highly exalted Him, and given Him the name that is above every other name, that at the name of Jesus everyone in heaven and on earth and under the earth may kneel, and that everyone may confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Plp 2:5-11). His deep humiliation was driven by His desire to redeem people from all sin. Thank God that in eternal life there will be no more jealousy with its evil effects. Even though some will
shine more brightly than others, there will be no jealousy to tarnish our bliss and joy! There will be genuine joy over the joy of others.