

Sermon 12 August 2018 Confession

1 John 1:5-10 John 20:19-23

I want to address something that we all take part in early in the service every Sunday morning – confession. Confession is a very important part of our Christian faith. It is acknowledging that we don't always get it right, that we make mistakes, and those mistakes are preventable because those mistakes are made through choices we make. I chose to tell a lie, I chose to lose my temper, I chose to steal, I chose to gossip, I chose to have ten drinks instead of two.

The word we use for these wrong choices is *sin*. It is a very small word but it carries a big punch. It can be a very threatening word, mainly because we have this perception of sin as being used to describe deeds of a nefarious or wicked nature. But in actual fact, sin, certainly in the Christian sense, covers any transgression or lapse from the code of conduct given to us by Christ. The Greek word used here is *hamartia*, which literally means a 'missing of the target.' To fail to be as good a father, mother, son, daughter, wife, husband, worker, person as we might is a sin. Now that includes us all.

Some people might balk at the thought that they are sinners, but put in this context, it has to be very difficult to deny, and in fact, they have to deluding themselves. John makes this very point in our first reading – 'If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth.' We need to fess up, take a good look at ourselves in the mirror. It calls for a degree of humility, but then I believe that to be a complete person one has to have a degree of humility.

Why is sin such an important issue to us as Christians? I could answer that in a variety of ways but I think the principal point is that sin gets in the way of our relationship with God. I have always said that we should view our relationship with God in much the same way as we view our relationship with anyone else. So think about it, if we offend someone, it will naturally impinge on our relationship with them. Well, the same goes for God. Whenever we transgress, it hurts God.

That is why the Confession takes place very early in the service. We make sure we have got our relationship right with God before we continue with our worship. Again, put it into the context of any other relationship. We have hurt or offended someone, we rock up and launch into a conversation with them without saying sorry or acknowledging in any way that we have caused hurt. How are they going to respond? Are they going to receive our approach as if nothing has happened? Not likely.

In our gospel reading Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit on the disciples and tells them that if they forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven. But if they refuse to forgive them, they remain unforgiven. So in our service, the priest, as God's agent, is carrying out this function. We are now in a position to engage with God in a meaningful way. We have, if you like, cleared any blocks that might be in the way.

The other consequence of sin is guilt. When we have done something we know is wrong and we have failed to acknowledge it, to ask for forgiveness, we carry the weight of guilt around with us. And what releases that weight? Purely and simply forgiveness.

A wonderful film made in the late 1980s illustrated this brilliantly. The film featured Robert De Niro who plays a slave hunter, Mendoza, who is converted and he joins a group of Jesuits led by Father Gabriel played by Jeremy Irons. This group goes into the South American wilderness in order to convert the natives to Christianity.

Mendoza wants to do penance for his past sins, which involved not only kidnapping natives and selling them into slavery, but also killing his half-brother in a duel. Father Gabriel persuades him to drag behind him a heavy bundle containing his armour and sword. What a wonderful symbol of the weight of guilt this proves to be.

They finally arrive at the territory of the very natives that Mendoza had plundered for slavery. There is a tense moment as one of the natives approached Mendoza brandishing a knife, and then he slashes the rope attached to the bundle and sends it crashing into the raging river below. Mendoza breaks down sobbing. The massive weight of his guilt had been unshackled, cut loose. And it had to come from one of the tribe against whom Mendoza had sinned.

In both our readings John makes two points. Firstly, sin is universal. It applies to every single one of us. Secondly, in Jesus we can find forgiveness, release from the burden of guilt. I am reminded of those wonderful words from the well-known song, 'He touched me.' *Shackled by a heavy burden, 'neath a load of guilt and shame. Then the hand of Jesus touched me, and now I am no longer the same.*

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