

Sermon 11 August 2024 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, and hopefully most of the time when we pray – confession. Confession is a very important part of our Christian faith. It is acknowledging that we have our faults, 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 – crucial point. I chose to tell a lie, I chose to lose my temper, I chose to gossip, I chose not to care for that person.

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 moral code of conduct given to us by Christ. The Greek word used here is *hamartia*, which literally means 'a missing of the target.' Perhaps 'falling short' could be a good way to describe the meaning in this sense of the word. We fall short of the expectations that are upon us as good people, as Christians.

Some of us might balk at the thought that we are sinners, but put in this context, it has to be difficult to deny, and in fact, we would be deluding ourselves. John makes this very point in our first reading: *'If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.'* 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 if we want to aim at being a complete person, one needs 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. The principles are very much the same. 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 offends God, it hurts God. And so our relationship is threatened.

That is why the Confession takes place 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. Well, it is just the same with God.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit on the disciples and tells them that if they forgive anyone's sins, then those people are forgiven. However, if they refuse to forgive them, then those people 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 called *The Mission* illustrated this brilliantly. The film featured Robert De Niro who plays the part of 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 kidnapping natives and selling them into slavery. 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 as they crossed rivers and scrambled up banks.

They finally arrived at the territory of the very natives that Mendoza had plundered for slavery. There is a tense moment as one of the natives approaches Mendoza brandishing a large knife. He stands over Mendoza and it looks very much as though he is going to cut his throat. But instead 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 has been unshackled, cut loose. And it could only come from one of the tribe against whom Mendoza had sinned.

In both our readings, John makes two points. Firstly, I refer back to what I said earlier, sin is universal. Every single one of us is guilty. *'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.'* 1 John 1:10. I cannot emphasise this too strongly. I really do believe that this lies very much at the heart of what it means to follow the Christian path, but unfortunately we all have to put up our hands and plead guilty. And unfortunately, as Christians we are far from exempt. We are too prone to pointing the finger and passing judgment. What did Jesus say? *'Why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your eye?'* Matthew 7:3. I would go so far as to say that I believe it is close to being the major failing we have as human individuals and as Christians. It is a criticism all too often levelled at Christians, and I am afraid to say, with some justification.

The second point John makes is that it is in Jesus that we can find forgiveness, release from the burden of guilt. *'If we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin.'* 1 John 1:7. I am reminded of those wonderful words from the well-known song, 'Shackled by a heavy burden,' which we will be singing at the conclusion of our service: *'Shackled by heavy burden, 'neath a load of guilt and shame. Then the hand of Jesus touched me, and now I am no longer the same.'* Those very few words really do capture the essence of what it means to feel the weight of guilt and that weight to be released through forgiveness granted by God and Christ. But that forgiveness must be preceded by the acknowledgment of our faults and mistakes, in other words, confession.

There is the story of a Sunday School teacher who was trying to teach the children that we all need God's forgiveness. She asked one of the girls, 'Lisa, when is a time when you might need God's forgiveness?' Her blank stare prompted a response from one of the boys, 'It's alright, Lisa. You don't have to tell her.' He then turned to the Sunday School teacher and said, 'We don't have to tell you our problems. This isn't the Oprah Winfrey Show!'

Well, the boy has a point. We don't have to necessarily tell others about our sins, but we do need to tell God. Confession enables us to move on. It lets us set the reset button and start again. As long as we remain in denial, we remain bogged down with the weight of guilt. David said, *'My strength has failed because of my guilt.'* Psalm 31:10. In Psalm 32 he outlines the path forward: *'When I kept silent, my vitality failed. I acknowledged my sin, you forgave me.'*