

In an age when the idea of personal sin and guilt has succumbed to many decades of attack, so that these once morally-controlling concepts have completely lost their teeth, it's a supreme irony that more public shame and condemnation is taking place than ever before. The stocks have given way to the Twitterstorm; the courtroom to the TV documentary. And in this context, the word 'sin', which never really went away, has made a serious comeback.

This series of Lent addresses will aim to explore what sin actually is, and to complement that understanding with a further exploration of repentance and forgiveness, which in Christian tradition – and in reality – are the only ways to overcome sin and its repercussions.

We know, of course, that the biblical description of sin comes hard upon the depiction of creation. As soon as humankind comes into existence, sin too is born. In

that lovely story where God brings all creatures to the man so that he can give them names, no companion is found for the man, so God creates a woman – as the man exclaims *'This at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh'*. The moral of the story is that humankind is not complete without companionship. It is a beautiful and concise way of expressing the truth that human beings find their identity in relationship with God and with each other.

It is when those relationships break down that everything goes wrong. Once they have eaten of the forbidden tree, the man and the woman hide from God – the once free and open relationship starts to close down, and they are excluded from the garden where everything is freely available for their needs, being cast out into a world where they must live by the sweat of their brow, and where danger and death lurk at every

turn. Not only is their relationship with God messed up, but also their relationship with the rest of creation is too. They find themselves free to dominate and abuse created things; their sovereignty over creation turns from being harmonious to being destructive.

At the same time, the relationship between the man and the woman starts to break down, as also in the next generation the relationships of their children. When faced with the consequences of their disobedience to God, first the man and then the woman firmly lay the blame on someone or something else – and even on God - *'The woman whom **you** gave to be with me, **she** gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.'* The consequence is spelled out quite clearly: enmity; the pangs of childbirth; domination; sweat and toil. Every effort to bring new life, to bring food from the soil, to build up the good, will be accompanied by pain and

failure. And indeed the next generation introduces the awful reality of envy between brothers and the fratricide of Abel at the hands of Cain.

I think the contemporary confusion over the nature of sin comes from the fairly recent notion that people are self-sufficient individuals and from the idea that human nature is founded in individuality. Along with the development of private faith and private religion, there has been a wrong understanding of sin as being an individual matter which is of no concern to anyone else. Yet if you take on board an older understanding that the individual exists because of other individuals, rather than existing in complete distinction from other individuals, you'll see that there can be no such thing as purely personal sin. By quite rightly rejecting a wrong idea of what sin is, modern society has put itself in the position of having no means of describing the sin which

continues to exist, so that when evil is encountered, it results in blind anger, outright condemnation and other such extreme reactions.

From his background as a Pharisee, Paul finds himself wanting to offer his hearers a handbook listing what sin actually looks like, so he comes up with his famous lists – here’s the one from Galatians 5: *Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.* All of these things have to do with the proper (or – better put – improper) conduct of human relationships on every level, while his lists of virtues are the things that make relationships work (hence the appearance of these passages as readings at

weddings): *By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*

In the Gospel and Epistles of Saint John we can learn from the experience passed down from the beloved disciple himself – the one who for whatever reason had a privileged relationship with Jesus. Here we learn how to walk in light rather than darkness; how to privilege the spirit over the flesh; how to encounter the life and love of God through the water of baptism and the blood of Jesus. The curious teaching of 1 John 3, which has led some into thinking that no one who has been baptised in Christ is even going to sin again, nails the understanding of sin for me: *Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God’s seed abides in them; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God.* Here we have it spelt out – sin is a bellwether, an

indicator, of the health of our relationship with God and with other people – and with God’s creation.

For it will not do to forget the indication from the Genesis story that the whole of creation is mired in this reality of sin, and that the redemption won by Jesus is not just for us individuals (see – the wrong focus on the individual again) but for all of God’s creation together. Saint Paul has it right when he describes the whole creation as in need of reconciliation to God: Romans 8.19 – *For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.*

We shouldn’t need Pope Francis to remind us that the consequences of sin are seen not only in our own lives

and our relationship with God, but also in our relationship with creation and the astounding (and fragile) context in which it is possible for human life to flourish at all.

If you’d like to have some sort of homework to do as a result of all this teaching, and mindful of the fact that this week’s address has merely sketched out what sin is, so as to understand what it is in us that gives rise to the need for repentance and forgiveness, you might spend some time asking what it is in your own sins that damages your relationship with God, with others or indeed with creation; and also what aspects of your life and lifestyle are doing such damage and yet you do not recognise the presence of sin in these things.

And in all things let us continue to pray for each other:

*O God, who knowest us to be set in the midst of so many and great dangers, that by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright: Grant to us such strength and protection, as may support us in all dangers, and carry us through all temptations; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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