

Living with Faith in the 21st Century: Lent Programme 2002

St Agnes' Anglican Church, Glen Huntly

Sunday 3 March

Living with sin and its consequences

The Very Revd David Richardson, Dean of Melbourne

I do wonder how the topics in this series came to be chosen? And how allocated? Catherine Eaton, known for her commitment to exploring silence amidst the busyness of life, is asked to speak about just that to help us find a silent place amidst our busy-ness. Mark Burton, formerly an Archbishop's Chaplain, has explored in depth the problem of evil, and he is asked to explore the old challenge of belief in an all-powerful God of love in the face of ubiquitous evil... I get sin. Am I regarded as the diocesan expert on sin? Worse, the diocesan sinner? Does Nigel *Wright* think I've gone *wrong*? How should I go about ridding myself of such a reputation? These questions and others related to them have continued to lead me in recent days to a self-absorbed distress – almost certainly sinful in itself.

Sin in Scripture:

The Biblical understanding is not that we are sinners because we commit various sins; rather we commit sins because we are sinners.

In Scripture sin is the purposeful disobedience of a creature to the known will of God. Unlike moral evil it is a fundamentally theological conception. Throughout the Old Testament sin is represented as a constant factor in the experience both of God's people and of the world, from the first transgression of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3) onwards. The moral and ceremonial precepts in the Law of Moses both increased the occasions of sin *and* developed a keener sense of moral responsibility. St Paul explores this connection especially in Romans.

With the writing prophets the sense of sin is deepened in another way. Their emphasis on the heinousness of injustice, of lack of mercy and of idolatry gave a new dimension to the human sense of sin. In addition Ezekiel (18:1-4) and Jeremiah (31:29-30) proclaim each person's responsibility for their own sins, and the psalms, stressing as they do the heart as the seat of sin, are marked by penetrating insights into the personal and emotional effects of sin.

When we come to the New Testament we find that these earlier understandings in the recognition that the roots of sin lie in human character are deepened and further developed. Thus in Matthew (5:21-25) we find, "You have heard that it was said, "You shall not murder," and "anyone who does murder shall be liable to the judgment," but I say to you "if you are *angry* with a brother

you will be liable to judgment...” Also 15:18, “What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart and that is what defiles.”

St Paul, writing before the Gospels were written, expands on the nature of sin as a breach of the natural law written in the human being’s conscience – (cf Rom.2:14-16). Thus Gentiles, not having the law, are a law unto themselves. In the Johannine writings sin consists especially in disbelief (turning away) from Christ, and the consequent judgment. This is so brief a summary as almost to be a caricature of sin in Scripture.

Sin understood by the Church:

Later theology, while introducing many formal distinctions has added little to the theological understanding implicit in the New Testament. Probably the most famous distinctions, apart from that of the ‘deadly’ sins (see later) developed by Roman Catholic Theologians in their cultivation of Moral Theology, have been those of mortal and venial and formal and material.

A mortal sin consists in a deliberate turning away from God as the goal of life and seeking satisfaction in a creature. A mortal sin to qualify must be committed with a clear knowledge of its guilt, with full consent of the will and must concern a grave matter.

A venial sin, though it disposes the soul to death, does not wholly deprive the soul of sanctifying grace. (See 1 John 5:16)

A formal sin is a sinful act which is both in itself wrong and is known to be wrong by the person doing it, whereas a material sin is an action which though in itself (materially) contrary to the Divine Law is not culpable because the agent acted either in ignorance or under external constraint.

Sin since the 19th Century:

In the 19th Century the optimism which was prevalent in thoughtful circles, led to the virtual elimination of the very notion of sin from much popular religious teaching and early in the 20th Century Freudian psychology was employed in many attempts to explain sin in non-moral and non-theological terms. Since then, occasional recognition of demonic forces in contemporary civilization has led to a renewed theological emphasis on the gravity of sin. This takes place so that still in baptism we are invited to at a personal level renounce “the devil and all his works” and at a corporate level so that events such as the holocaust, the destruction of the World Trade Centre and so on, we see evil at work. Despite these exceptions I suspect that for most people with whom we live and work and play “sin” is out of favour and therefore out of mind.

It’s not, I think, that we don’t know sin’s reality; rather it’s that we do, and we don’t like it. So we re-name it. It’s as if in the great jigsaw puzzle called life we think we’ve got the picture sorted but we find there’s a bit that just won’t fit. So instead of re-jigging the whole we simply saw the annoying piece into a different shape so that it ceases to be a misfit. We’ve done the same thing

with death or, as we would more often say, "passing on". We've sanitized the fact of it and the language of it in a wrong-headed attempt to prevent it hurting us, or at least to reduce the power death has and can have over us.

From St Gregory the Great (540-604) onwards the Church spoke of seven deadly sins – called deadly because they led to spiritual death – viz. envy, pride, covetousness, gluttony, sloth, lust and anger. All of these have been rehabilitated in some form or another by our contemporary culture; most of them now have become medical conditions: one of them, pride, has completely transformed itself and become a virtue. The interesting thing about this phenomenon is that it is a reversal of four thousand years of thought in two ways: first it is a rejection of the very notion of sin as an offence against God. However that has happened before. At the Enlightenment sin was succeeded by the notion of crime which is an offence against other people. But the notion of crime grew out of the biblical and ecclesiological perspective that human beings were responsible for their own wrongdoing. That no longer seems – with certain well known exceptions – to be the case. The notion of personal responsibility and personal guilt exists, if at all, only in caricature, and our culture makes sense of sinful acts by regarding and describing them as symptoms of psychological disease. Frank Furedi, himself a humanist, wrote in a recent article "Making a Virtue of Vice", that actions once denounced as sins are no longer interpreted through the vocabulary of morality, nor are they of theology – but diagnosed through the language of therapy. The deadly sins have thus become behavioural problems which require treatment. There are, says Furedi, no longer sinners, only addictive personalities.

The Rehabilitation of some Deadly Sins:

Let us then place under the microscope for our closer examination and delectation some deadly sins. Think first of Lust. Of the seven, Lust, it has been said, is the only one about which all of humankind with very few exceptions, knows something from personal experience. So while I might just get away with the general proposition, "Sin is a subject about which I know little," it would not wash were I to say "Lust is a vice I cannot understand". However, people who only a few years ago would have been condemned for their lustfulness may now be pitied on the grounds of their being addicted to sex and ergo in need of therapy. The American Association on Sexual Problems estimates that between 10 to 15% of all Americans – i.e. some 25 million people – are addicted to sex, a statistic cited by Furedi. Confessions made, not to a priest in the privacy and with the confidentiality of the confessional, but to newspapers and magazines, perhaps even, for all I know, for a fee, by sex-addicts of significance such as David Duchovny and Michael Douglas, have caused – what once upon a time would have been called promiscuity – to acquire a new and medical label. *Sex Addicts Anonymous* is an organization which argues that the condition it exists to help is not easily cured, and Martha Turner, an American doctor, has claimed that sex addiction is the very

hardest psychological illness to treat with high relapse rates and low levels of recovery. Why is one not surprised?

A note of warning needs to be given here. If you're a famous actor this new illness may allow you some tolerance or even forgiveness for a lifestyle which others might look upon with disapprobation - one the one hand - or - on the other hand - envy. But if you're a bishop nobody will accept the sex addiction argument so forget it!

Having now mentioned the subject of envy let's consider what we have done with that particularly unattractive sin. Envy, like covetousness has been, I understand from Frank Furedi, repackaged now as an 'impulse-control disorder', and these two both cast as inevitable consequences of our consumer-oriented society. Ours, it is said, is an addictive society that almost *compels* individuals to be envious one of another. This line of thinking received theological and episcopal encouragement recently when Bishop Bruce Wilson claimed in a sermon that your good news is my bad news; apparently none of us can bear the thought of another's success. Envy is not, I think, as ubiquitous as this argument suggests, though it is a spin to social advancement. When it occurs however it is certainly ugly: anyone who palliates our envy is seeking to destroy us.

Envy may be the motive force of social movement but it is also the reason we have little social originality, for Envy can never be creative, only imitative. The envious must always join the rat race even if only in order to keep up with the Joneses. Envy, the sin, is ugly, impotent, numbed with fear, yet unceasing in its appetite; and it knows no gratification save endless self-torment. As a societal/psychological disorder? It is far less frightening that way, less ugly and easier to excuse. Anger joins it and covetousness as an impulse-control disorder.

If you have ever felt so angry that you felt you could breathe fire then you are truly addicted to anger as a state of being. *Spirit of Discovery*, an online organization offering therapeutic advice, comforts those of us who are angry with this good news. Whether your problem is road rage, computer rage, trolley rage or air rage you need not worry; it's not a sin, simply a treatable medical condition. The fault lies less with us than with society which expects too much adaptability of us too quickly.

Gluttony too is now a medical condition; compulsive eating is a psychological disease with a biological cause. It's good to be allowed to be a glutton and better still to be encouraged to be proud of it.

"A glutton and proud of it." That nicely introduces the most repackaged and rehabilitated sin of them all. Pride was traditionally the deadliest of sins. The Tempter in Matthew 4 assumes that even Christ will not be able to resist the seductive blandishments of pride. Yet pride has been re-defined and had a total makeover; no longer sin or disease, it is now both virtue and health. Indeed it's the *absence* of pride which constitutes a serious psychological problem. Low self-esteem? You need help in building up your pride. Poor educational performance? Sexual misdemeanour? Bulimia? Crime or

homelessness? Drug addiction? If any or all of these is/are your problem the answer is that you have not enough pride; you need to raise your self-esteem.

Now it must be said that there is something in all this; there is undoubtedly a legitimate form of pride, and psychological problems may well cripple a person's capacity to say no to the fifth whisky or the fourth cream bun. This seems to me obvious and comforting. On the other hand if I am never responsible for my decisions; if all are the result of my illness or my lack of self-esteem, then it seems hard for me to have any legitimate pride, for I am that poor creature, the ultimate victim; a mere plaything of the gods.

Our world, that is - the post modern moral world - seems to allow me to opt out of taking personal responsibility for anything. But is it a uniquely modern phenomenon? Back in the days of the writing of the Gospel, rather than each person taking seriously the responsibility of each, it was seen to be expedient that one man should die for the sake of the nation. And today, while outside the church sin has been defined out of existence, and therefore individual responsibility is a precarious notion at best, nevertheless we still need someone to carry the can. An unknown public servant may stuff-up but it's the politician who is supposed to resign. A priest may sin but the Governor General, too lenient and generous to the perpetrator, is the one expected to pay the price.

Living with sin? St Athanasius believed that there were sinless lives before and after Christ. His view has not prevailed. I have known, thank God, some very good people. I have known some very holy people. I've not met a sinless person. But acknowledging sin is a complete pain so if I can attribute my anger or my envy, my greed or my laziness to a psychological condition, then instead of taking responsibility for myself, I can play the 'victim' card as did Adam when he said "the woman tempted me", as the woman did when she blamed the snake. There's usually a woman or a snake available to blame.

And that makes me realize that it *was* ever thus and religion has always understood that people will try to find excuses for their failings. Things may go wrong; it is *never* my fault. But the great thing about sin is that God in Christ always forgives; so while there's sin there's hope. The dreadful thing about illness is that it doesn't need forgiveness and is often incurable, in fact it's frequently fatal.
