

## **Sermon For Ascension Brandon, And Resurrection Cambridge.**

**Sunday August 30th 2009**

Mark 7:14-23

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus, as is often the case, gives us both good news and bad news, firstly, the good news. In referring to the dietary requirements of the Jews, He is at pains to point out that there is nothing that is outside a man that can defile him by going in. Good news then, we can eat what we want, and none of the washing up requirements of the Jews need give us cause for concern. Then immediately, he hits us with the bad news, what defiles us does not need to enter into our bodies, it is already there, in our hearts and in our minds. It is the things that come out of us that defile us, not the things that go in. Then, He lists all manner of things that are in our hearts and minds to show us what He means, everything from evil thoughts to adultery, from pride to murder. Now all these individual problems add up to one almighty problem, one that we are born with, but one that these days it is increasingly unfashionable to talk about, that problem of course is sin, whether original sin, the birthright of all descendants of Adam and Eve, or actual sin, the sins "which we from time to time most grievously have committed, by thought word and deed".

But many people say surely the very notion of sin is an anachronism. And let's be honest, outside of the Church that is probably quite true, the very notion of sin, the word "sin" itself, these are indeed out of fashion. Perhaps at this point we should wonder why.

Well firstly I suppose, thanks to some overzealous and sadly uninformed Christians, sin came to be associated with innocent pastimes, like card playing or dancing or theatregoing. To speak of such matters as sin is of course quite ridiculous.

But of course much more seriously sin has come to be perceived as unfashionable by the self-confident secularism of our society. Years ago a European who thought autosuggestion to be the key to self-improvement urged people to say repeatedly, "Every day in every way I am becoming better and better." We as Christians might smile at such naivety, even arrogance. Yet we smile too soon, for any society that worships the myth of progress, as does ours, most certainly believes that it is getting better and better. And of course in a society that is getting better and better, there is no place for outdated ideas like sin.

Nevertheless, the church, in her singing, preaching and praying continues to use the word sin. The philosopher and theologian, Paul Tillich said in an interview for *Time* magazine, “For twenty-five years I have tried to find another word for ‘sin.’ There is no other word.”

So since the church at least is not going to drop the word, perhaps we should be sure that we know exactly what it means. Sin, in the final analysis, is as simple as it is dreadful: sin is simply telling God to “clear off.” This may be explicit and conscious. But more often, in fact nearly always, it is implicit and disguised because it is unconscious. It makes no difference. God is told to get lost. He claims us for himself. We say, “Leave me alone.” He insists that he wants only our good, and the obedience he wants from us will prove to be for our blessing. We reply, “Everywhere else in life obedience is something we have to render a boss we can’t stand. Why should we think you are any different?” He grounds his claim upon us in his love for us. We say, “I didn’t ask for your love. Furthermore, I resent your love; it’s an intrusion; I want my life to be my own.” Sin itself, and the foundation of all individual sins is a self-important, proud posture of defiance, of rejection, of disdain and disobedience. The posture pretends to be a sophisticated looking past God because there is no need of Him. Our sufficiency, however, is only a ridiculous figment of our imagination, and our innocent sophistication is in fact culpable contempt.

We read in children’s stories where someone highborn, aristocratic, sets out on a walk. He steps around peasants and paupers, looking down on them. From his aristocratic position he never really sees them, never takes note of them, never speaks to them, so far beneath him does he find them to be. As the children’s story unfolds one of the peasants or paupers was in fact a prince or a princess. The aristocrat’s pride, his groundless superiority, has caused him to forfeit something precious.

Men and women strut like aristocrats disdainful of the God who in his Son is lowly and humble, the God whose condescension to us for our blessing they regard as weakness in Him. In their posture of proud aloofness they do not grasp the God whose coming among us at Christmas and Calvary through peasant girl and cattle stall and corrupt criminal justice system is so very ordinary. When he does plant himself in front of them and presses both his love and his claim upon them, they dismiss him: “Out of my way, ordinary fellow.” At the bottom of humankind's self-important posture of repudiation, is rejection and dismissal of him.

So what are the consequences of this posture? well I think that they are threefold. The first consequence, obviously, is estrangement from God. God isn't indifferent to our arrogant superiority. He reacts. He won't allow us to denounce him, defy him, and at the same time remain on casual terms with him. The one who is eternally our Father now looks upon His alienated sons and daughters. Created in God's own image, man relentlessly conspires against God and his truth. We sabotage God's work. We deafen ourselves to God's word.

The second consequence is estrangement from our fellows, those who were given us to be our brothers and sisters. The first question in scripture is addressed to Adam and Eve, every man and every woman, after they have alienated themselves from God: "Where are you?" God says. But the second question in scripture is addressed to Cain after he has murdered his alienated brother: "Where is your brother?" That's a question God is forever asking all humankind all the time: "Where's your brother? Where's your sister?" An abyss has opened up between those given us to be brothers and sisters with the result that we are all tragically estranged from each other.

The third and perhaps the most tragic consequence of God's reaction to our sin is alienation from ourselves. A gulf opens up, somehow, between me and myself. You see, God can always be refused. Still, our constant refusing him doesn't change the fact that he has made us for himself and therefore we are going to be most truly human, most truly our "self" only in him. To refuse him is always somehow to refuse ourselves. To be estranged from him is to be estranged from ourselves. To think we can get rid of him but continue to possess our "self" by means of our "self" this is double folly. The self that we've lost can never be the means to possessing a self we are trying to find. It's no wonder that humankind is chronically discontent, diseased, ill-at-ease, self-alienated. It's no wonder we keep asking "What's wrong with me?" when in fact everyone is suffering from the same ailment for the same reason. It's no wonder we keep trying to anaesthetize ourselves with toys and trinkets and playthings. Yet every so often the anaesthetic breaks down and we are startled to find "it's still there" the haunting, non-specific but undeniable knowledge that there's something of the innermost "me" that I'm missing yet can't quite find.

Are you thinking that this sermon is a bit of a "downer?" Have the last few minutes been pessimistic and depressing? Then what I'm going to say next should send you home rejoicing: "Today's sermon is the most optimistic I have ever preached." Why? Because the most optimistic thing to be said of any of us is that we are sinners. And of course the most

hopeful thing in our lives is the realisation of our own sinfulness. Because without that, we can never realise our need for salvation, without that we can never realise our need for a saviour and without that, Jesus stands at the hard closed door of our harder hearts.

The understanding of sin remains important to the Church and to the Christian, because only by looking at the depth of our sin do we see the height of God's love, that He loves us so much that He would send His Son into the world to take on Himself all that ugliness and nastiness and evil, more than that to become in Himself all that ugliness and nastiness and evil, to become sin itself and then on the cross to put an end to it all. There on the cross, in the moment of Jesus total rejection by God and man, at the moment of His cry, "My God My God why have You forsaken me" there the price was paid for the sins of the whole world for all time, there Satan was defeated, and with him the death that he brought into the world. there in that moment, God's judgement on His sinful creation was executed. In that moment we went from condemned criminals to co-heirs with Christ of the very Kingdom of Heaven, what a transformation!!!

The church is entrusted with the message of forgiveness, just because the church, the Christian community, consists of those who have tasted forgiveness themselves. The Church is made up of forgiven sinners, so we know what it is to have been an alien and what it is now to be a citizen of the Kingdom of God . We can now see the folly and the ridiculousness of those arrogant human beings who tell the creator of the cosmos to "get lost." We see the folly and ridiculousness of it, but we don't laugh at anybody who still lives there, because we once lived there ourselves. and of course here is the rub, we have lived there ourselves, we know the loneliness, the sense of loss, the sense of incompleteness. We also know the incomparable joy when our loving heavenly Father met us in His Son and brought us home, the sense of completeness, of belonging, of being loved.

We as followers of The Lord Jesus Christ, have indeed been entrusted with this wonderful message, but not to take it out on a Sunday and look at it, not to keep it in our churches as some kind of secret, but to share. To share with all those whom we meet in our day to day lives who have not heard this wonderful news. Jesus said in our gospel reading that it is what comes out of a man that defiles him, for the redeemed forgiven Christian, let what comes out of us be a light, a beacon that shines before our friends, our neighbours, our families our co-workers and everyone whom we meet, that they may by its light be guided to the salvation that is theirs for the taking through the wonderful incomparable love of our Father in Heaven.

