

Practicing the Way

Healing from Sin

On this Remembrance Sunday we are all too aware of the sin in the world. We know that although the world can be a beautiful place of great creativity and goodness we also know there is something wrong. Wars and conflicts, fighting, violence and killing are the most extreme manifestations that something is wrong. But even in society when we encounter poverty and inequality, addiction, loneliness, abuse, breakdown of relationships we know that despite all the beauty around us there is also brokenness and pain. It suggests that we all need saving.

The word used in scripture for what is wrong with the world is sin. It is an emotionally loaded word for lots of people. They will hear it and feel an instant allergic reaction. Weightwatchers have trivialised it by talking about sins being the calories you eat in your food and whether you transgress by eating more than you should. It's sinful to have that extra cream bun.

Sin is often associated with sex. Naughty but nice, lust and love.

I know some people try to rephrase 'sin' by talking about abuse or hurt. Concepts that contemporary people can understand better and there may be some merit in that.

Jesus used the term sin to talk about something wrong in the human heart. It's not that we do bad things like gossip, lie, cheat on our taxes, have affairs, betray and deceive.

Its often that we want to do bad things and even when we don't want to do bad things we end up doing bad things like an addict caught in a self-destructive loop..

Jesus once said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." He likened sin to a disease and himself to a healer. Based on this text, ancient Christians called Jesus "the doctor of the soul." And trying to go on the spiritual journey of discipleship without healing from sin is like trying to run a marathon with a broken leg — you're not going to get very far, and it's not going to be very fun.

A key step in our apprenticeship to Jesus is healing from sin.

Good news is that Jesus came to save us from our sins. In the Christmas story we will hear once more how the angels announced the birth of Jesus, whose name means ' the one who saves us from our sins'.

Sin is one of the bibles central metaphors for talking about what is wrong with the world and the human condition. But it is not the only one. Sometimes the problem is that we are lost and looking for a way home. We are in exile and need freedom. We are in slavery

and need liberation. We are isolated and need welcome and celebration. We are infirm and needing healing. We are despairing and need hope.

Sin is not a one size fits all metaphor for the human condition but it does matter. It tries to describe our heart condition. Where are our hearts orientated towards? Ourselves and our happiness and wellbeing and what may bring that about. Or fundamentally are our hearts orientated towards God as the source of our happiness and wellbeing. Are we closed in on ourselves or are we open to God and others. The core meaning of sin is a missing of the mark. We are pulled away from our Creator to worship the creation.

Sin in the bible can describe a kind of power over us, like a Pharaoh, to use the story of Moses and the exodus. Paul wrote eloquently about the power of sin in Romans 7 about 'It is no longer I who do it but sin in me'. Sin is like being in bondage to an alien power.

Then the Bible also talks about 'sins'. Acts of wrongdoing committed by individuals.

Here there is three dimensions to sin:

- o Sin done *by* us. We are most familiar with this. We mess up, we can be unkind, lie, dishonour our parents, fiddle our taxes and so on.

- o Sin done *to* us – we have all been sinned against, hurt, wounded, betrayed, slandered. We can be both victim and perpetrator. As I said last week those who are hurt can hurt. Hurt people hurt people.

- o And sin done *around* us. Due to the radical individualism of the West we can often miss the final dimension of how the environment around us can have a warping effect on our soul. We know of institutional sin, systemic sin, sin built into the structures of society. Collective corporate sin. Often the ruling elite build into the very structures of society systemic injustice and violence. They will seek to bring divisiveness and rancour to differing groups and races in order to keep overall control and pursue their agenda. Play the race card, or the sexist card, or the ageist card. It's the tactic of authoritarian leaders – divide and rule rather than peace and harmony.

Like breathing second hand smoke no one will hold you guilty in a court of law but that doesn't make it any less deadly. The Germans in the 1930s I'm sure were all respectable people but got caught up in the ideology of Nazism, the sin done around them, and ending up as part of one of the greatest evils in human history.

Kalistos Ware, an orthodox theologian comments that we are born into an environment were it is easy to do evil and hard to do good.

It is easy to hurt others but hard to heal their wounds.

The cultural currents we swim in often push us away from the way of Jesus. The good news is that when we are intentional about being apprentices of Jesus we can find healing and hope.

But sin goes deep and has different layers. Robert Mulholland suggests four layers that we have to move through in our healing:*

- o Gross sins
- o Conscious sins
- o Unconscious sins
- o Attachments

So take for example anger.

- o Gross sins are obvious explicit ones: murder, violence, adultery, domestic abuse
- o Conscious sins are socially acceptable and even celebrated in our culture yet not the way of Jesus: materialism, bragging, gossiping, cursing. We know deep down these are contrary to Jesus' heart yet we still choose to do them. It's an aspect of our will that is not surrendered to Christ. Overtime the Spirit may gently work on us smoothing out those rough edges calling us to leave those behaviours behind.
- o Unconscious sins are ones of omission not commission. It's what we don't do rather than what we do do. We don't speak up for the poor or the unjust. We don't turn out for someone who is suffering or in need. Or they are sins of motivation - we may do the right thing but for the wrong reason.

In the case of anger – you won't hit someone or yell at them but you will still do the passive aggressive stuff, the cold shoulder or feel contempt in your heart.

Carl Jung the psychoanalyst called this your shadow side. *It's murky and unclear and harder to distinguish between vice and virtue. As our shadow side is more exposed through intimate relationship with God and through prayer it can feel humbling and even humiliating to find these revelations – but it is a key step in healing.*

- o Attachments – are another word for idols. What are our trust structures. We are emotionally programmed for happiness and we need things that will make us happy and at peace. They are usually good things but we depend on them rather than on God. Our health, wealth, family, job, career. They are our attachments which we put first in our lives and on which our happiness depends.

In the case of anger – your son does poorly at school and although you don't snap at him or shame him, inside you're angry and stressed out because emotionally you need him to do well in school and live up to your expectations and plans for his life. That will make you happy.

The great paradox that Jesus challenged his followers with was that as long as we need our life to go a certain way to be happy and at peace we will never be happy or at peace.

Ignatius of Loyola who founded the Jesuits said sin is 'an unwillingness to trust that what God wants for me is only my deepest happiness'. In other words, we trust other things first. We look to creation rather than to the creator for our ultimate happiness. Which is why the end goal of spiritual formation is detachment from the things of the world and attachment to God through Christ.

Our part in the healing of sin is the practice of confession.

We heal from sin by coming out of hiding. This is why this session, almost more than any other, must be put into practice. The practice of naming your sin to another person or to God is what the writers of the Bible call "confession."

When we feel guilt and shame because of something we've done or not done, confession is likely the last thing we feel like doing. But the path to being free from shame involves being open and transparent with someone we trust. In James 5v16 we read, "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." When we name our sin or shame or secret with a trusted person, we can experience healing. The notes this week give practical suggestions how to do that.

At this time of Remembrance it is always good to come before God, giving thanks for the sacrifices of those who gave their lives for our freedoms, but also to confess the sins and passions that have led to war and that are still with us and within us and around us today.

Closing prayer

Loving God, we open ourselves to you and confess all that we have and have not done, both consciously and unconsciously, in opposition to your goodness. Help us to live more openly with you, that in our being seen in all, we may also too be healed in all, growing in your love. Amen.