

Sermon

Saint Peter's

The First Sunday of Lent

Watching the Australian Open recently, you could be forgiven for thinking that you were in church during Lent. Crowds of people wearing 'I'm a sinner' t-shirts, a reference to the ultimate winner, and unlikely looking Italian, Yannick Sinner. His name repeated, ceaselessly, for two weeks on national television.

The Christian doctrine of sin is difficult to comprehend today. There are a number of reasons for this. The main reason is the end of the traditional doctrine, with nothing to replace it. Then there is the mistaken attempt to replace it with one that is based on the conditions of the modern world: that is, on subjective individual experience, leading to inauthentic guilt feelings. Then there is the attempt to replace it with an idea of sin that is limited to individual acts, leading to a new Christian moralism, or legalism. Now we have the mistaken attempt by modern secular culture to replace it with the contemporary idea of self-development.

We need to be mindful of all of this, if we are to represent the essential, universal content of the Christian doctrine of sin. If we are to win new credibility, for the core content of the Christian teaching about sin.

With the confusing of the traditional Christian doctrine of sin within the modern world, and the resulting loss of meaning that it has suffered, this does not mean that people today are no longer aware of sin. On the contrary, although their understanding we be diffuse and partial at best, it remains one of our biggest problems today. Our problem today is that without a proper understanding of sin, we no longer seem able to master it. We no longer seem able to fulfil God's

command, 'Do not let sin have mastery over you. But master it' (Gen 4.7 also Rom 6.14)

Today the turning away from God has made the task more difficult. No longer God, but we ourselves, are responsible for the problem of sin in the world. So that, when it all comes out, we blame others. Or we blame the society, its systems and structures. We can understand this to some extent. The modern secular society claims individuals. But it no longer links that claim to another source that gives meaning to individual life. It no longer grounds or justifies that claim by recourse to a higher authority. To a religion, that alone can give meaning to human life.

The end result of the decoupling of modern secular society from its historical origins within Christianity is that many people have now come to feel that the demands of society are repressive. Alienating. Cold. Leading to the wrong view of society: to an understanding of society and its representatives as evil; as being singularly responsible, for all of the individual sins, all of the individual failings, that are there, in every human society. This kind of mentality, that localises all the sins of the world, in more or less specific others, or in groups, can easily lead to violent upheaval. Christianity is not irrelevant to the modern world. It is deeply, directly, and very practically relevant to the modern world. It is the foundation, font, and future of the modern world. The modern world that must return to Christianity, to its historical roots within the Christian religion, if there is to be a future for the modern world, and for every individual in it.

Against the deep-seated human inclination to seek evil in others, while at the same time as absolving oneself, or one's own group, from the biblical and especially the Christian idea of sin, within Christianity the Christian doctrine of

sin insists on the root of sin being found within the individual human being – within every individual human being - not in someone else.

Naturally, the universality of human sin isn't always manifest in all of its destructive power. The prophets proclaimed the universality of sin among us. The Apostle gave that proclamation final form. So why, if sin is powerful, and universal, does it so seldom manifest itself?

The biblical and Christian answer is that God constantly protects his creatures, in spite of their sin, against the extreme consequences of what they do. God preserves his people, limiting the destructive results of their sin. God graciously spares and protects his people, and human ingratitude for this, taking for granted the good things that happen, is another expression of human sin.

The Christian doctrine of sin forbids that moralism that refuses solidarity with those in whom the destructive power of sin is manifest. Sin's universality shows such a moralistic attitude to be hypocrisy. For all the need to check manifest evil, and its consequences, the Christian doctrine of the universality of sin functions to preserve solidarity with evildoers, in whose conduct the sin that is latently at work in all of us is expressed.

The Christian prohibition of moralism is underrated. In our own day it has fallen victim to the end of the doctrine of original sin, at a time when a different doctrine has not yet replaced it. If such views are based on the idea of actual sin, moralism can be advocated only in part, and at the cost of enhanced guilt feelings. Weakening of the conviction that sin is a universal fact, before it is an act, has opened the door to the moralism that either seeks evil in others or that seeks evil in oneself, leading to self-destructive guilt feelings.

Last year, my sin asked me, 'What is sin?'

It is a good question. We'll look at this next week.