

**Saint Peter's  
Second Sunday in Lent  
25<sup>th</sup> February 2024**

**The Christian doctrine of sin and the Christian ministry of reconciliation**

Have you ever felt that you are not feeling yourself? That in actual fact you are quite unwell. That all you want is to feel yourself again? But you have been to a number of doctors, and they have been unable to diagnose you, let alone treat you. Leaving you feeling lost, and all at sea. Not yourself. With nothing, and no one, to turn to. 'This is Australia today,' wrote one journalist on Thursday this week. 'Our nation no longer comprehends what is happening to itself.'

Thankfully, there is a diagnosis, and a solution. Which the Christian Church is to ring the bell on, loudly and clearly, for the sake of the nation and for the sake of the Church in its vocation. The diagnosis is the Christian doctrine of human sin. The diagnosis is the Christian ministry of reconciliation.

In our English bibles, because they have been translated from the Greek, all of our different failings have come under one word - 'sin'. This is from the Greek word, *hamartia*, meaning literally, 'to miss the mark'.

The OT, however, in the original Hebrew language makes the distinction between different forms of sin, according to their underlying motivation. Careless sin could be removed by sacrifice. Wilful sin, could not. The guilt remained. This was especially so when it was directed against the norm itself. Intentional conduct against God's commands, was intentional conduct against God, who gave the norm. Here the Hebrew word was *pasha*, meaning apostasy, or revolt against God. In the OT, sin meant human conduct, contrary to the norm, the divine law, and the one God, from whence it came.

The OT idea of the unclean heart, leads us deeper than the individual act, to the human heart. To the human will. To the human will, in a state of rebellion, against God's will. Against God.

On Ash Wednesday, the psalmist prays that God will give him a new heart, a clean heart (51.10). According to the prophets, in the coming age of salvation, God would give us a new heart. God himself would come. Establishing his own kingdom in this world. And putting in us a clean heart. A heart that no longer rebels against, but that accepts, that lives in harmony with, God's will. A will that no longer breaks, but that keeps, God's commandments. A will that no longer contends with, but that lives in harmony with, God's will, in God's world.

In the New Testament, a new concept of sin emerges, in which sin is a part of the universal human condition. It is there, in every individual, human heart.

It is the law that reveals this element of the character of the human condition. Only in encounter with the divine law, does it come to light. In summing up of all the ten commandments, in the one commandment 'You shall not covet' (Rom 7.7), the Apostle reveals the universal nature of sin, in the form of desire; desires that are against the commands of God; and therefore against the God who issues them.

Stirred up by the law, sin stimulates desires in us, the Apostle said (Rom 7:8). Our latent sin, becomes latent sin, in the desires that go against God's commands, and are therefore against God. This Pauline understanding of sin, as desire, gave basic shape to the Christian doctrine of sin.

Sinful desire has corrupted the order of nature. According to the order of nature, human beings, must be subject to God. Human creatures, subjected to God the Creator. Humanity, subjected to divinity. Human sin, in the form of desire, has corrupted the order of nature.

But what is the root of desire? Corrupt desire rests on a corruption of the will. In the non-observance of the order of nature, in the non-observance of the laws of God, in human sinning against God, we find an autonomy of the human will that puts the self in the centre and uses everything else as a means to the self as an end. This is pride, which makes the self the principle of all things, and therefore sets itself in the place of God.

Pride is the root of corrupt desire. Those who desire seek everything for themselves. The final goal of desiring is the self. But the pride that sets itself in the place of God, and that, as a human creature, will inevitably fail in the attempt, in the end, leads human beings into the hatred of God. Into the full depth and consistency, of the sinful will. Into the sin of pride. In the kingdom of the world, the love of self, or pride, means hatred of God. While in the kingdom of God, the love of God, puts the self in its proper place.

The structural principle of corrupt desire, which is the climax of the apostle's concept of sin as desire, is the idea that wanting to be as God, which in its end result is love of self, implies hatred of God.

The root of desire is pride. Only by taking account of this root, and to the structural unity of desire and pride, do we come to a proper understanding of the Christian doctrine of sin as desire. As a general human phenomenon, the structure of human desire helps us bring to light the phenomenon of human opposition to God in the world. As a corruption in the natural order of humankind, in subjection to God.

At the root of desire, there is pride. The self-centredness, of the selfish human will. That wants for itself, the position of God. And in the opposition to the commands of a positive divine law, is the rejection of the position that belongs to God by right in relation to his creatures, including his human creatures. So that in the Christian doctrine of sin, we have an understanding of universal conduct relative to the reality of God. And a structure of human conduct that is common to all individuals, that belongs to the very nature of the humanity that

passes down naturally to individuals from generation to generation, so that no theory of inheritance is needed.

Last year, my sin asked me, ‘What is sin?’

Once upon a time there were two dogs, a Labrador and a cocker spaniel, who were good friends. They were very old, and both were looking forward to going to heaven. One day, on the same day, the two dogs died. Arriving in heaven, they were so excited, they couldn’t wait to get in. But God met them first and said to them, ‘Just wait a moment, I need to ask you one question’. Turning to the Labrador, God asked the Labrador, ‘What do you believe?’ The Labrador thought for a minute. Then, dribbling a little bit, said ‘Well, actually, this is what I believe: that life is about having fun, eating, and just sitting next to you, with my head in your lap’. And God said to the Labrador, ‘Oh how lovely. You can come in and sit down here next to me on my right hand side’. Then, turning to the cocker spaniel, God asked ‘What do you believe?’ The cocker spaniel replied, ‘Well, actually, this is what I believe: that you’re sitting in my seat.’

The Christian Church, with its diagnosis of the problem of human nature in Australia today, that is the truth of human sin, and with its faithful administration of the solution to that problem, the Christian ministry of reconciliation, that is the ministry of Christ, and of the Apostles, is not irrelevant to the overcoming of the problems facing Australian society today. On the contrary, it is indispensable to the overcoming of those problems. It is indispensable to solving the problem of Australia society today: the problem of our sin. As well as the problems in the church. Whose vocation lies in the preaching of the Gospel, and in the faithful administration of the holy sacraments, of holy baptism, holy eucharist, and holy matrimony. The Christian vocation that, in the words of Frederick Buechner, ‘is the place where our deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.’

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