



Second Sunday of Lent  
Sunday 20 March 2011

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## Sin

A sermon by Revd Rosy Fairhurst

**Readings: Genesis 12.1-4a; John 3.1-17**

There is a hoary old preaching story where Mrs Coolidge, wife of US President Calvin Coolidge, asks him about the subject of a sermon he heard. 'Sin' he replied. When asked for a bit more detail about the content, he said, 'On the whole he's against it.'

Today I'm tempted to wonder how the preacher was against it. Was he simply saying, it's a bad thing, we know that now let's go home now, or was he saying, it's a bad idea to think about, we'll only feel terrible, so let's not bother. Well, it was alleged to have happened in the 20's so I'd put my money on the former. Today, I'd say there's at least an even chance it was about the latter. If you want an accurate one liner from what I'm going to say, you'd better keep listening – because neither of those will cover it.

When I was asked to speak about sin or sinfulness, as the second one of our Lenten series taken from Psalm 130,  
'If you, Lord, were to mark what is done amiss,  
O Lord, who could stand?' Psalm 130

I did come away feeling a little bit set up. And I think it is because of the gap between the self evidentness of 'I'm against it' and the sense that a lot of people, including myself in many ways, just don't want to deal with the sense of condemnation and blame associated with it.

It's next week's speaker who gets to deal with the next verse of the Psalm:  
'But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be feared.'

However it's impossible to understand the Christian view of sin unless we see it in terms of the whole ecology of the Christian faith. And this is an ecology founded upon God's love, and all our understanding being set in the context of our relationship with God. The trouble with a lot of the sin-talk has been that it has been taken out of that context. Alistair McFadyen says that the proper function of sin-talk is to turn us to salvation. 'Sin-talk has to serve the communal and personal practices of confession, penitence, intercession, love and forgiveness.' Blame on the other hand fixes us there. Even the context of law and sin is covenant – which is relational not contractual. We need to look no further than the two passages we're given today to see that this is in fact the way the bible's sin-talk works.

The Genesis passage, the story of the call of Abraham, comes after twelve chapters telling the story of human sin. First with the story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden, then the killing of Abel by his brother Cain, the breaking of the commandments, the descent of the capacity to communicate with each other into the Tower of Babel, and the story of Noah, desperate measures being required to save the sinful world from destruction.

We need to hold onto the fact that we have been given the dove and the rainbow as the sign of the covenant between God and humankind in the Noah story, and that now, in this hinge story in Genesis, God turns his attention to show what that covenant of love, God's insatiable desire to bless rather than to curse, to rescue humanity rather than condemn, is going to look like in this dire situation. He does it by focusing on one family, that of Abram and Sarah. One family, whose story

and destiny will be so that God can show God's love and salvation 'for the nations' – far from narrowing it down it will open it right up beyond the people of Israel to all the peoples of the world.

Why do we associate sin with cursing and with condemnation? Partly because the church has been less than our best self in joining a wider culture which has forgotten the Christian story, and started to think of sin in isolation, as if we were autonomous beings, and it was a choice between our freedom or God's freedom, without the surrounding story of our relationship with God. As soon as we take sin outside the context of our *relationship* with God, it isn't a Christian understanding any more – because, fundamentally, that IS sin, to imagine that we stand autonomously, independently, on our own, removing ourselves from the warmth of God's love. Putting it back in reminds us that we are creatures, dependent on God for our very breath, interdependent and connected with the whole of the cosmos – as Brian Cox has been showing many of us very graphically on the TV.

If I think of the most destructive situations I have encountered over the last couple of weeks, they are characterized by a standing apart, by an imagining that there can be no relatedness to the 'other' so that everything is interpreted through a lens of malice and legalism, of the *other* as dangerous and hostile rather than fundamentally connected. This is the consequence of sin, of our separation from the love of God – that we get separated at all levels, from our own bodies even, that all our relationships become disordered and disorientated, that even our desires get muddled and misaligned.

'Lord if you were to mark what is done amiss, who could stand?' – No-one.

Of course the accounts of the Garden of Eden, Cain and Abel and of the Tower of Babel take us into the territory Augustine calls 'original sin' – against which there has been a powerful reaction, perhaps most obviously in Matthew Fox's book "Original Blessing." Reminding us that God's intention is to bless and not to curse, or as the conclusion of the story from John puts it, Jesus' purpose is not to condemn the world but to save it.

This Lent we are taking an extended look both at that beautiful counter voice within a church focusing so much of the time on sin in a way already separated from God in the writings of Julian, so clear that this world is one which God made and God loves and God... so able to see, with the image of the hazelnut as all that is in God's hand, the interdependence of all things in the light of God's loving gaze. 'It lasteth and ever shall because God loveth it.' Yes, we do need to remember the original blessing and that it extends to the whole of the cosmos, as both Matthew Fox and Julian spell out so eloquently. But Julian knows that we need to understand too, that 'sin is behovely' and perhaps too we need to retrieve something from original sin.

I have a friend, who is both a priest and training to be a psychotherapist, who gave her colleagues a set of definitions of Christian concepts in relation to therapeutic terms. She explained original sin in relation to attachment theory – the understanding of how when a child is born, if things go right, a process of attachment takes place between mother and child, and indeed between all the close members of the family and the child. There is a context for love, intimacy, trust, the conditions needed for human beings to thrive. If it fails, if for some reason the child is not able to bond, to attach with a primary carer, they are in big trouble. It's going to be difficult for them to stay safe because they won't trust their parent, it's going to be difficult for them to form intimate relationships in later life. Depending on what kind of attachment disorder it is, it's going to be difficult for them to stay in relationships at all and it might result in all kinds of destructive behaviours.

When we take our understanding of sin and our behaviour outside the terms of our relationship with a loving God, we are similarly in a place of separation. We could describe original sin as ways in which we have failed to attach with God, as having acted on the possibility for separation from God and then from others and indeed the planet instead of out of our awareness of being loved. Of course we can't say that this is all our individual fault – we are born into a world where there are many forces and factors which push us towards this separation, but, if we fail to admit our collusion

with them when we experience their power and impact in our lives and those of others, we are in even bigger trouble.

Let me give an obvious example at a macro rather than a therapeutic level because this plays out in groups, organizations, countries and globally. If we react to our economic crisis by blaming it all on the obvious greed of the bankers, and fail to recognize our collusion – and this is the vast majority of us, with the inequities of the current system – whether through property owning, carrying credit cards, benefitting from cheap labour in other parts of the world, ‘we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.’ Until we do, we won’t start trying to find sustainable alternatives which put us back into right economic relationship with others. This is not about feeling bad; it’s about getting to a place where we are open to help find the solution, and open to God’s grace in doing so.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of Augustine’s understanding of original sin, and how it has been used and interpreted, he was onto something very important in his recognition that if sin-talk is to be able to lead us to salvation, it has to help us recognize and take accountability for the situation we are in *whether it is of our own individual making or not*. Good psychotherapy does not leave the patient blaming everyone else for their predicament, but it might leave us recognizing our need of a spiritual answer. Good spiritual direction doesn’t ignore the extent of the diagnosis of sin – because it is the very thing which clues us into opening ourselves up to God’s saving action. But the diagnosis of sin is in terms more of ‘where we have wounded God’s love and marred his image in us.’ In my experience, confession has been about recognizing where I have failed to walk in the light of God’s love, which is something very different from blame and condemnation. And it has come because I’ve been put back in touch with God’s love at work in my life.

Nicodemus’ encounter with Jesus begins in the dark. He comes by night in a place of spiritual unseeing. Jesus tells him that to receive eternal life he needs to recognize that he can’t **do** anything by himself to receive eternal life. His spiritual life is not in his control. He must receive it as a gift, being born from above – he must start to understand his life in terms of relationship with God, not what he can achieve. A gift needs a giver. And Jesus points him forward to the way he will receive this gift.

‘And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.’

I preached on the serpent and the rod a while ago in this church. What stayed with me was this. You have to look at what harms you to heal you. If you don’t face it, you can’t heal it. These words of Jesus from John’s gospel take us further into this territory. In order to heal our world – for God so loved **the world** – Jesus has first to be lifted up in the place of the full impact of sin. And we have to stay with him there, bringing ourselves, allowing him to show us our connectedness with this sin in the world, before we can receive our healing. Healing for ourselves, for our relationships, and for our planet. It’s strong medicine.

This Lent we also have the opportunity to take an extended look at what harms us in order to get to what heals us, in the Victim No Resurrection installation and the stories of violence and suffering which will accompany it. If we really believe that God wants to save the world through Christ, how can we avoid facing up to these realities. We have been confronted daily by the reality of sin in the world – dis-ease and death and suffering well beyond anyone’s individual blame – in the events most recently in Japan and now in Libya. If our picture of sin isn’t big enough to take them in, how are we to understand that this too is part of what God is in the ultimate process of healing and bringing to salvation.

‘Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.’