

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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Rector of St James

Third Sunday of Easter

(b-easter3)

15 April 2018

Readings: Acts 3: 12 - 20; Psalm 4; 1 John 2:15 – 17, 3: 1-6; Luke 24: 36b – 48.

“Christ above me, Christ beside me, Christ within me”

On Sin and Brokenness

One word that features in all of today's readings is the little three-letter one 'sin'. Small thought the word may be, its impact on humanity both in the ideas that it carries, and its use (and abuse) in the public domain is well known.

Over the past twenty centuries, the church cornered the market in sin and squeezed it for everything it could get out of it; from making emperors crawl to bishops for forgiveness, to medieval power sharing between war-lords and the church, to the sixteenth century sale of indulgences, to the burning and shunning of heretics, to the exclusion from church and condemnation of those we do not like or approve. This is not a topic that I would choose to preach on very often, but today it seems to have chosen me, so please bear with me. What of sin?

Firstly, sin is not about doing something that is naughty but nice, such as eat more chocolate than you should or sleep in to midday – that would be to trivialise it. Likewise, it is not about failing to measure up to some sort of divine rule-book. In fact, sin is spiritual and moral dysfunction. The origin of the word, as we have it, comes from the practice of archery and refers to the act of missing the mark on the target.

In religious terms, a sinner is one who fails to be the person that God wants them to be; in other words, one who fails to understand or do what is good and right. The classical Christian doctrine sees sin as part of the human condition. As St Paul wrote to the Romans: “...*for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God*” (Romans 3:23).

This is also what the story of 'the fall' of Adam and Eve in Genesis chapter three is about. It provides a mythical account of how humanity came to understand good and evil, thereby having a choice about how to behave toward one another. As a result of the fall, humans ceased to be spiritual innocents or babes but rather, as the story intimates, became like God. And with this knowledge came consequences; such as having to work for a living, pain in childbirth, and ultimately death.

The Genesis image of Adam and Eve being ‘cast out of the garden’ reinforces the view that humans, though created in God’s image, lost something of their divinity because they failed to do what is right in the eyes of God and instead chose to pursue their own way. Under the fifth century theologian, Augustine of Hippo, this idea segued into the doctrine of ‘original sin’, which is that all people are born into sinfulness –in other words, it is the human condition and there is nothing we can do about it.

One less-formal definition of sin that I have used, is that sin is present in those actions that break the goodness, respect and dignity of human relationships. It therefore has a lot to do with our attitudes and motivations that lie behind what we do.

Trying to Get Right with God and Each Other

Being aware of the problem of sin, the natural inclination of humanity is to try and do something about it – indeed, try and fix it. That where sacrificial systems came in. By giving up something of value, humans attempted to say sorry and make amends. This is the idea of ‘redemption’, a transactional process of ‘buying back’ that which was lost.

As with the ‘sin business’ in the church, the Israelite practice of ‘sacrifice’ expanded and took on commercial proportions, initially with the cults at the many ‘high places’ and finally at the Temple in Jerusalem. Here there was a sacrifice for every sin and the temple market available for you to purchase the appropriate item to be given to the priest for sacrifice. It was a closed system bringing great benefits to those in charge. No wonder Jesus reacted violently toward it by up-ending the tables of the money changers!

The trouble was that, with few exceptions, the system of sacrifice never seemed to change things all that much. People didn’t behave any better and the community was no better off. Yet, the desire for sacrifice grew and became hugely bureaucratized and ritualised, as much of the Old Testament writings demonstrate.

There was one day of the year, however, when a series special sacrifices were made for the sins of the whole community. It was known as the Day of Atonement and is described in the sixteenth chapter of the book Leviticus. The key sacrifice in this liturgy involved the scapegoat, upon which was placed all the sins of the people and that was subsequently driven out into the desert to die – thereby literally ‘taking away their sins’. The people’s participation in this ritual was vital to its efficacy.

Theologian, James Alison, points out that this practice stands in contrast to the many and varied ‘theories’ of atonement, which are ideas or theologies but not actions. In Ancient Israel, the atonement was something that happened to you as a means of bringing salvation corporately. So, the Biblical evidence of atonement in Leviticus tells us that sin and brokenness was dealt with through ritual participation in an experience that sought to restore relationships and bring about change.

The Cross and Sin

Now this might all sound a bit academic or abstract, but it is important in helping us understand what is going on in the business of Jesus' death and resurrection. It may be a challenging thing for you to hear that God did not sacrifice Jesus on the cross for our sins, we did. **The cross** was humanity's response to God, in that the people preferred to kill Jesus (a religious troublemaker) rather than listen to his words or change their behaviour; and the Gospel of St John labours this point. In this way, we failed to be the people that God wanted us to be and we mirror Genesis 3 by rejecting God all over again. The cross, therefore, became the prime example of human brokenness; but it didn't end there.

The creation stories in Genesis tell us that humans were created to be in fellowship with God. Moreover, we understand that God loves us and is interested in what we do. The parable of the prodigal son and the loving father is the metaphor for the relationship between God and humanity. So, what was God to do in the face of rejection by humanity? Send down fire and brimstone upon us to get even? No!

Resurrection was God's response to the cross. The hypocrisy of the sacrificial system had been made apparent many times in the past; often causing God to reject people's sacrifices. Psalm 51 puts it positively and eloquently:

*“You will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”* (Psalm 51: 16-17)

The prophet Amos, however, was less positive. He quoted God as saying:

*“I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.”* (Amos 5: 21-24)

The sacrificial system had to come to an end because it was exploitative, destructive, wasteful and achieved little. Resurrection became God's solution to the failed temple system. The sacrifice of Jesus became the last sacrifice, and Jesus became identified with the scapegoat 'that takes away the sins of the world'. But this was a sacrifice that returned to be a sign of the new world order that God was instituting.

Humanity's recognition of Jesus as Messiah became a sufficient action for salvation. In this way, **repentance and reconciliation** became humanity's response to the resurrection, and the relationship with God was restored. But there is more!

Reversing Sin and Re-entering the Garden

Reconciliation is not a passive thing, and atonement is not merely a piece of dogma to be believed because it has a more powerful and active side to it. The failure of the many theological theories of the atonement (and I know of at least 10 of them) is that they are passive, abstract and under human control. This is because they are about a moment in time, are dependent upon a world-view that was current at the time of their invention and are controlled by theological elites that decide who is right and wrong.

In contrast, when atonement is understood as an action in which we participate, it becomes transforming. The cross reversed the effects of sin as described in Genesis 3 and we have been metaphorically allowed to return to the Garden of Eden, there to commune with God. We still sin, but its effects no longer need to control us, nor do we need to buy our way back into God's favour through sacrifice, because there is to be no more scapegoating!

Instead, by recognising Jesus as Messiah and by participating in his mission of good news and salvation, we (the church) become the ongoing presence of Christ in the world. Through us, God seeks to unite all people in Christ, not through condemnation but rather by love. And the good news of salvation is this: that we may live in peace and harmony with each other and God because we are all forgiven. Salvation is therefore not about the simplistic medieval view of seeking to avoid eternal punishment.

The Eucharist, (this act of worship in which we now participate), is a current manifestation of the Garden of Eden in which we now live, and like the Day of Atonement, the Eucharist requires our active participation to be effective. Moreover, it is effective because through it (including the words, the readings, the music, the prayers and Communion) the resurrected Christ comes and encounters us. That is the Christ who is above me, beside me, and within me.