

Sin – A Sermon for the Last Sunday after Trinity 2010  
 Jeremiah 14 vv 7-22 p772, Ps 84, II Timothy 4 vv 6-18 p1197, Luke 18 vv 9-14 p1052

*If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us: but, if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (I John 1 vv 8&9).*

A little boy was getting under his mother's feet one Sunday morning. So she sent him off to church where she had heard that the bishop would be preaching. When he got back, she asked him what the bishop preached about. "Sin!" came the reply.

"But, what did the bishop have to say about sin?" the mother demanded.

"I think he was against it," her son replied.

I very much hope that the bishop was against sin, but can we understand why the bishop was against sin any more than the little boy seemed to? On the one hand, the very word "sin" sounds old fashioned. We don't use it much – except in a trivial sense. "Would it be a sin to eat one of those delicious-looking éclairs?" We suspect churches which are always banging on about sin. We are afraid that talking about sin will put people off coming to church at all. People don't want to be made to feel guilty!

On the other hand, (Think about this!) how much of the Bible would make sense if sin were unimportant? What would be left of our prayer books and service books if we did not take sin seriously? What would be the point of the Eucharist if the Lamb of God did not have to die to take away the sin of the world in order for us to have Communion with the living God? How many hymns would have to be culled from our hymn books if the notion of sin were consigned to the scrapheap of irrelevance?

If sin were unimportant, why did Jesus die on the Cross, what would the Church have to offer and what will happen to you when you die? Does it make any difference what you did? Does it make any difference what Jesus did? Does the Church make any difference?

I, like the bishop, am against sin! To me sin matters. Sin alienates us from God. Sin alienates us from one another. Sin alienates us from creation. Insofar as it is God's Will that all should be one in Christ, one in an eternal unity of love, sin thwarts the very purposes of God.

But what is sin? Often the best way to understand what a word means is to think about its opposite. What would be the opposite of sin? The opposite of evil is good. The opposite of unrighteousness is justice. The opposite of not caring about people is mercy. The opposite of falsehood is truth. The opposite of undependability is faithfulness. The opposite of death is life. The opposite of bondage is freedom. The opposite of hatred is love. The opposite of indifference is love. The opposite of selfishness is love. But what is the opposite of sin? To go with God is the opposite of sin. To go with God is the opposite of sin. To go with God means to be good, just, merciful, true, faithful, to live eternally, to be free, to love, to

demonstrate love, to exemplify love, to personify love, to be love, as God is love. Sin therefore is evil, unrighteousness, selfishness, lies, faithlessness, slavery, hatred, indifference to God and to other people, and eternal death.

Sin doesn't make sense if you don't believe in moral absolutes. If you believe that essentially there is no such thing as right and wrong and that moral values are culturally relative then sin makes no sense. If you believe that moral values are culturally relative, however, you cut the ground from under the feet of those who would say that the Nazis *ought not* to have attempted to exterminate the Jews, that Afghan girls have a *right* to education, that forced marriage and female circumcision are *wrong* or that the USA *shouldn't* execute people with IQs so low that they can barely understand what is happening to them. If moral values are culturally relative, who are we to judge another culture? Moral relativism won't do. Right and wrong are real. Good and evil exist. They are not merely in the minds of human beings. They are not mere concepts. They are eternal realities. We have to be humble in our search for Truth. We have to be tolerant of those who disagree with us. It is good to be humble and tolerant. But tolerance is not the only moral absolute. Right and wrong exist and it is our duty as human beings to search out the difference, to cleave to the good and to eschew the evil.

Apart from cultural relativism, which, as we have seen, is fatal to our sense of humanity, the concept of sin has two big problems in the contemporary Church. The first is complacency. We don't set ourselves a high enough standard. So we don't appreciate just how far short we fall. Instead of measuring ourselves by the standard of God, we measure ourselves by the culture in which we live. We compare ourselves not with Jesus but with the people we meet every day. By that standard, I guess most of us are not bad people. In fact, I imagine, we are probably better than the average. We certainly ought to be. With all the means of grace that we have to hand as Christians, we have no excuse for not being better people than those who don't pray or come to church, read the Bible and participate in the Sacraments. We could so easily become like the Pharisee in the parable, complacent that we are better than the ordinary people around us and that perhaps, therefore, God owes us.

But we're not meant to measure ourselves against other people. We're not meant to use human standards. As human beings we are called to measure ourselves against the image of the God in Whose image we were created, the God Who is love, the God Who is Jesus. Human beings are called to love as God loves. To fall short of the example Jesus sets is to sin. *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.* Perfect love is our calling. Anything else is sin. We ought not to be complacent. Sin alienates us from God, from other people and from the universe. Sin is anything less than perfect love. We are all sinners and we all need to repent. If we measure everything we do, say and think against the standard of perfect love, we must acknowledge that we are sinners. If we know the consequences of sin, we can only repent.

One big problem with sin in today's Church, the more common one, is complacency. The other big problem is perhaps complacency's opposite. There are people who cannot believe that they are forgiven. They live with guilt. They worry. They keep thinking about wrong

things they did long ago. Some even believe that they are damned. Many act as if there were no point in trying because they always fail. The Scripture is quite clear. *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* When we repent of our sins, when we confess, God forgives. Our sins are washed away. We no longer have to feel guilt. We no longer have to feel sorry, to mourn. We don't have to worry. We are set free from sin. If we remember our old sins it is only so that we can avoid them in future or perhaps put right the wrong we have done. But we don't have to feel sorry, guilty or afraid. *if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* That is the Word of God and we had better believe it.

If we measure everything we do, say and think against the standard of perfect love, we must acknowledge that we are sinners. What we do, say and think springs from what we are. But what are we? We are the children of God, fellow heirs with Christ. We are born again, a kingdom of priests, the Temple of the Holy Spirit, the Body and Bride of Christ. We are crucified with Christ, buried with Him in Baptism. We are redeemed. As Christians, we are all those things. So why do we continue to sin? Why this contradiction between what we essentially are and what we so often do, think and say? St Paul speaks of the flesh lusting against the spirit. We are all those things, but our basic human nature still drags us down. The point of today's sermon is to encourage us to live the resurrection life. As Christians we have to take sin seriously, to acknowledge sin for what it is, to realise what kind of people we are called to be and to repent of our shortcomings, but this is just a part of our becoming what we are. We are set free from sin, the world and the devil. We are set free from death and the fear of death. We are free to live as the children of God in this world and in the world to come. Jesus came so that we should have joy in all its fulness. What greater joy could there be than to know that in Christ we have overcome all evil, bondage and death and that we are free to live in love for ever? Yes! Live the resurrection life. Live it in all its fulness. In Christ we overcome.