

The Seeking love of God

A sermon preached by Dr Tony Lemon at the 8am and 10am services at St Peter's Wolvercote on 12th September 2010.

1 Timothy 1, part of v. 1

'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners': and among them I stand first.'

Luke 15, v. 10

'I tell you, there will be greater joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent'.

All our readings this morning direct us to think about a distinctly unfashionable concept: sin. The word has a Victorian ring, and is probably associated in the public mind with the religious attitudes of earlier generations. It rarely surfaces in popular culture, though there was an interesting exception in 1987 when the band known as the Pet Shop Boys produced an interesting track called 'It's a sin', a song of regret for a mis-spent life – 'everything I've ever done' - calling 'Father forgive me'. For most people the concept of sin conjures up the breaking of a moral code, a set of religious laws such as the ten Commandments which Moses brought down from Mount Sinai, or for Moslems the laws of the Koran.

This is something which most people in Western societies have moved a way from. How often today do we hear anyone speak of a couple 'living in sin'? Instead of religious laws society has a looser sense of moral values, imbued more than many people realise by our Christian heritage, but variably passed on from one generation to another, variably understood, and certainly variably practised. The change is healthy in many ways – Jesus certainly didn't think in terms of rigid rules, much to the anger of the Pharisees, because he saw that prioritising observance of such codes could easily become a distraction from true faith. Too great an emphasis on absolute rules has all too often induced excessive and destructive feelings of guilt. But it is also true that a total absence of rules poses a big challenge, as all members of society, and especially younger people, are left in varying degrees to work out where they stand, what their values are, how they should live their lives and relate to others.

When I was a student, I remember that Evensong in my college chapel at St. Edmund Hall invariably concluded with the prayer 'God grant grace to the living, rest to the dead, peace and concord to the Church, the Queen and the People, and to us sinners, life everlasting'. I'm afraid my reaction was rather irreverent: I always rather resented the implication that in this establishment hierarchy we seemed not even to be people! – I suppose I rather missed the point that, notwithstanding our sins, everlasting life was within our grasp.

It is God's love and forgiveness, not sin and guilt, which are at the heart of today's readings – even our Old Testament reading from Exodus, though that certainly portrays a very different image of God from that in our New Testament readings: a wrathful God, angry that the people whom he has brought out of bondage in Egypt have, during Moses' long absence on the mountain, allowed themselves to

worship false gods in the form of Aaron's golden calf. The God portrayed here is very human, in his capacity for anger, potentially vengeful, and he even seems not to be very clear-thinking in his anger: he calls the people 'stiff-necked', which suggests stubborn and obstinate, whereas he might more accurately have described them as fickle, ungrateful for their escape from Egypt, people of shallow faith and little understanding. This is even a God with whom it is possible to argue, and to win! – as Moses did – indeed he shows himself to be quite a skilful negotiator, even pointing out to God that if he turns his wrath on the people now, the Egyptians will be in a position to sneer about a God who rescues people only to take vengeance on them. At least this Old Testament God is also a God capable of repentance, willing to reconsider, and give another chance to the people whom he ultimately loves, though that is not always explicit in Old Testament narratives.

Paul, like Moses, is a leader, trying to lead not one but many peoples in the known world into faith in Christ. But he is, of course, a leader with a past. He is the man who had been Christ's persecutor – trying to stamp out the new faith with every means open to him under the Jewish law, often quite brutally. Yet God had chosen him as his instrument, trusting him despite his record as Christ's persecutor, to become his ambassador. There is perhaps no greater example of redemption, and Paul stands as an encouragement to all in this respect. Paul never forgets his past – he knows that to keep alive the memory of what he was is the surest way to keep him from the sin of spiritual pride, and urge him to ever greater effort. He blazons his record abroad, so that others may take courage.

Another great example of a redeemed sinner is John Newton, the former slave trader who subsequently became a great preacher and hymn writer. Like Paul he never forgets his past: he even composed his own epitaph:

'JN, Clerk, once an Infidel and Libertine, a Servant of Slaves in Africa, was by the Mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, Preserved, Restored, Pardoned, and Appointed to Preach the Faith he had so long laboured to destroy.'

Like Paul, Newton was not brooding unhealthily on the past, but remembering so as to rejoice in the enduring wonder of God's grace. Newton's hymns abound with the depth of his gratitude for salvation from his former life, and his perception of Christ as the friend of sinners – here is a verse from one of his less well-known hymns:

*'When he lived on earth abasèd,
Friend of sinners was his name,
Now above all glories raisèd,
He rejoices in the same.
Still he calls them brethren, friends,
And to all their wants attends.'*

Jesus portrays the God who sought out Paul and rescued Newton in his parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. Here is the very essence of the Gospel. In the Old Testament God is frequently represented as the shepherd of his people, who protects and cares deeply for every one of his scattered flock, so the image is a very familiar one to the Jews. before God. For Jesus, there is joy in heaven over one sinner

who repents, one sheep who is brought into the fold. What a contrast to the attitude of the Pharisees: for them, what mattered was close monitoring of rigid rules and absolute condemnation of those who failed to keep the petty details of the law. Under this regime, joy in heaven appeared to come from one sinner who is labelled and obliterated. For Jesus, in the words of another hymn – not Newton's this time:

*'For the love of God is broader
Than the measure of man's mind;
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind.'*

What Jesus is describing is not the *tolerance of sin*, but the *seeking love of God*. Jesus embodies a God who goes out to seek sinners – a God who goes out to seek and save that which was lost. Within the fold we are, of course, never free from sin, strive as we may to live our lives in the faith of Christ. But, recognising our weaknesses, we can respond to the seeking love of God.