

SIN – LET’S GET SERIOUS

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Mark 9:38-50

Introduction:

In our readings today, the NT letter of James reminds us how practical religion should be, especially in living it out in deeds. In recent weeks we’ve had several readings from James along this line, indicating that our faith needs to be applied and is not simply academic stuff! Today’s reading includes a condemnation - not of wealth in itself - but of wealth obtained through exploitation of the weak.

However, it is to our Gospel reading that I wish to turn our attention, especially Jesus’ comments regarding the seriousness of sin. You heard today what Jesus said:

If your eye / your leg / your arm causes you to sin: CUT IT OFF!

Now I know that the Bible contains warnings against self-righteous behaviour, but ... (secretly)

I’m pleased to be amongst this group in this church today. I can see that we are holy people, a sinless crowd! As I look around, I can see no one who has deliberately pulled out a sinning eye, let alone cut off a sinning arm or leg. So, we are a perfect church after all; I can’t wait to tell the Bishop...

OK – let me take my tongue out of my cheek.

We heard those words of Jesus repeated this morning.

But what is he saying? How are we to understand it?

Let me tell you a story about advertising two well-known brands: Pepsi and Coca Cola. Everyone – and I mean everyone – knows these, don’t they! They are sold on those brand names with their brand colours and logos throughout the world.

But here is an interesting story, about Coca Cola first being marketed to a Chinese consumer market in the dominant Mandarin language in the People’s Republic of China. Coca Cola could not simply be translated with those same consonant and vowel sounds with which we are familiar in English, without being very careful.

If it was pronounced “ke kou ke la” – it translated directly as “eat the wax butterfly”!

But if pronounced “kou koo kou leh” – it translated directly as “happiness in the stomach”!

Guess which pronunciation they settled on?

In Taiwan, where another Chinese dialect is dominant, there was no problem with the brand name “Pepsi”, but its international line “Come alive with the Pepsi generation” – if translated absolutely directly – came out as “Pepsi makes your ancestors come alive again”! We can safely presume they fiddled with that one until it was more appropriate.

We always have these problems in translating directly from one language to another, especially when we take idioms – phrases commonly used in one language – and render them meaningful in another language.

Even the most ardent Biblical literal fundamentalist would argue here that Jesus was not intending to be taken absolutely literally, or else we’d have a human race of dismembered people. Jesus was using what the linguists call hyperbole – a form of exaggeration in order to make a point clearly. In this case, he wished to emphasize the need for drastic action with regard to sin, which can only be conquered by radical “spiritual surgery”. To be honest with God and ourselves, we cannot escape acknowledging our sinfulness.

Yet how we deal with sin is also important. Jesus often said to the Pharisees – who generally prided themselves on their ability to observe the tiniest detail of religious law: You deal so much with the minutiae of the law, that you forget the meaning or the thinking behind it in the first place, or to use his idiom which is still a part of the English language: You observe the letter of the law but not the spirit of the law! That surely is something we would wish to avoid, yet it can be a natural tendency in humanity, and can be a tendency amongst Christians especially if we tend to become self-righteous. That too is to be avoided.

Let’s face it – we don’t like to talk much about sin, some of us have horrors of the type of “hellfire and brimstone type” preachers we may have heard or seen portrayed in a movie, and I bet few of you sat around a dinner table with friends recently and turned your conversation to a discussion on sin!

In our faith we have tried to move away from being motivated to know and love God primarily out of fear or guilt, and to focus more on God’s movement towards us out of love, and therefore to respond to God out of love.

All societies have some concept of right and wrong. They may differ in details, and of course there are different ideas of what is acceptable behaviour, but there are some aspects that almost seem to be “written into” human genetics – for instance all societies agree that murder is wrong, that incest is profoundly unhealthy and damaging, and that caring for others is acceptable and good. Such ideas have been around before any introduction of “religious codes”, especially in the form of the Jewish or Christian faith.

Our concepts come from God, we believe, as God has been revealed to us through the prophets and in time in the person of Jesus Christ, also God. God embodies love and goodness, is holy, is without fault or failing or flaw. God created all that is, and created a universe in accordance with his nature, and has revealed to us who he is and his love for us has been clearly demonstrated.

Creation is consistent with God, and is therefore designed to work in ways that work best, that in themselves and good and loving. That includes the freedom to choose – as is the case in all relationships, where enforced obedience does not necessarily indicate love. Any laws or commandments are designed to ensure the creation functions properly, according to God’s design.

However, we have consistently opted for im-perfection for lesser quality of life, for sub-standard living. We have failed to choose God consistently, and his ways of doing things – designed for our best interests anyway.

Hence, to sin involves going against the laws of the universe, and against the God who designed them in the first place. It is damaging to us all – to the individual, the community and to relationship with God. It potentially limits the effectiveness of God’s power at work in and through us.

Imagine a perfect world – no not 6 months in Mauritius of at the Okavango Delta – but a world without sin. It would be a world where there was **no**

- War or holocaust
- Hatred, racism or prejudice
- Injustice
- Child abuse, child abandonment
- Children born outside stable, committed relationships (“marriage” as we call it)
- Failed marriages
- Rape
- Adultery
- Lustful thoughts, abuse of sexuality
- Fits of rage
- Selfishness
- Bullying
- Greed
- Theft, murder, assault
- Drugs and crime syndicates
- Abuse of alcohol
- Unkind thoughts
- Corruption, fraud, underhand business deals, dishonesty
- Squabbling, inter-generational conflict
- Exploitation
- Blasphemy
- Worship of money, power
- Lying, deceit, cheating, “white lies”
- Selfish ambition
- Hunger, poverty, homelessness
- Weakness of faith, poverty of prayer, failure to respond to God
- Splits in the church
- Disobedience to the commands of God
- No financial difficulty in the church – everyone would bring in the full tithe
- Difficulty in trusting in God!

Conclusion: The Good News:

The Good News of God is that God has reached out to us even in our sin – as the New Testament phrases it: God’s love towards us is proved in this – that whilst we were still sinners, God sent his Son Jesus to die for us!

Baptism is a sign of God’s initiatives towards us, based on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Eucharist is a thanksgiving for that, and also celebrates God’s closeness to us – though sinners. This is simple yet profound, that in the Eucharist, we celebrate the closeness to us of God’s holiness, power, love and willingness to heal and transform us. God doesn’t shun us, but comes into us!

At the same time, in love for us, God asks to us to remove / to root out all that damages us, one another, and our relationship with God, and all that inhibits God from transforming us in readiness for that day when we come face to face with God, in that place where sin is no more!