

UNMASKING SIN

Nic Denny-Dimitriou - 3rd July 2005

Romans 7: 15-25

If I had known last week what my sermon today would have been about, and had published it in the leaflet, some of you may have stayed at home today! Taking the passage from Paul's letter to the Romans, even with all its tongue-twisting sentences, we are going to focus on sin. I've used the title, "Unmasking Sin".

Preachers are sometimes accused of either focussing too much and too negatively on sin, or of being "soft on sin". I hope that I represent neither of those extremes, but sin is a serious and necessary topic and want to ask: What is sin? How does it affect us, and what can we do about it? I do so with my usual qualification that no sermon can cover the full topic, only aspects of it, but let's do so today looking at the Romans 7 passage.

The United Nations was established in 1945 in the aftermath of the Second World War to end all wars. Sixty years later, the preamble of the original UN Charter makes sobering reading:

"We, the people of the United Nations, determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, have resolved to combine our efforts to accomplish our aims; to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, to practice tolerance and live together in peace as good neighbours."

Those are noble sentiments, yet when held up to our record over sixty years they seem to be hollow words and empty promises, given the ongoing nature of human conflicts and considering that the past hundred years are reputedly the most vicious and war-filled years of recorded human history.

"Even when I want to do right, I can't." says Paul. "Instead of doing what I want to do, I do wrong."

Since 1945, despite our best efforts, the horrible litany of war, artificially created famine, gross violation of human rights, the exploitation of the powerless by the powerful, and the degradation of both human society and natural environment, have not continued and become even more deeply embedded in the structure of our world.

As someone has said, "Evil is chillingly efficient when it comes to mutating itself to avoid exposure and eradication".

We've all heard government statements about human rights. Whether on China or Rwanda or Zimbabwe, the statements all sound the same. There is either denial that anything is going on, or a partial acknowledgement with an explanation of why this does

not represent a problem and how people from outside lack the understanding to properly interpret these events. Either way, no one is ever identified as being responsible. No matter where you shine the spotlight, you find someone pointing the finger at someone else who in turn points to another. Confronting it feels like trying to unravel a tangled web of wool - when you can't even find an end.

But such a web of denial and blame shifting is not confined to international relations or human rights abuse at the governmental level. Every time a child is hurt on a school playground you can see exactly the same reaction. One seldom hears of a child who put his hand up to say, "It was my fault."

And children are no different from us. I do it too - I've just had years more practice so I can be a bit more subtle and convincing about it.

We all complain about dangerous drivers but how often do you meet one? How's your driving? Probably there are some of us here – all nice respectable people – who shouldn't be allowed on the road. Who here thinks they are a better than average driver? I know I do.

A study in America surveyed 1 million high school students about how they thought they compared with their peers.

- 60% rated themselves as better athletes than their peers; only 6% thought they were worse.
- On leadership ability 70% thought they were above average, only 2% below.
- And on "ability to get along with others", almost nil rated themselves below average, 60% rated themselves as being in the top 10% and 25% thought they were in the top 1%.
- Just in case you think it's confined to teenagers, another survey found that 94% of teachers thought they were better than their average colleague.

How do I love me? Let me count the ways.

In another interesting study, the residents of an American town were asked to volunteer to collect for the Cancer Society. Only 4% volunteered. But a survey in the same town a few months earlier, asking how people would respond if they were to receive such a request, had 60% saying, "Yes, they would respond".

What did St. Paul say? "My selfish desires won't let me do anything that is good. Even when I want to do right, I can't."

Most of us think we are capable of being considerably better than most of our peers, but we end up unable to follow through on our good intentions. Our opinion of our potential ends up looking like hollow pride, no better than the preamble to the UN Charter.

St. Paul said: “In every part of me I discover something fighting against my mind, and it makes me a prisoner of sin that controls everything I do.”

[The following 3 paragraphs are left in the notes, but they were left out of the sermon due to length of time, and concerns that it was getting too off-the-point.]

We have so many ways of hiding from our own involvement in the hurting of people and the world - most of them unconscious. We do it for others to. We distance people further and further from any responsibility for their own actions. Perpetrators become victims. “Yes, I know he was abusive, but if you understood what happened to him in his childhood you’d understand why.” But, we’ve taken a truth and pushed it too far. I might understand why he became abusive, but I don’t understand why he’s still abusive and getting worse. The fact that there is an explanation that shows how others are to blame too, doesn’t give you an excuse to stay that way.

Maybe your childhood was such that by the time you arrived at adulthood on the scale of personal goodness and integrity you were down to about 10%. That’s not your fault, but you are responsible for whether your next move is to 9% or 11 %. The Spirit of God is constantly at work. As Paul said, we know what the right thing is. The question is whether you have the guts to step out from the pack, own the responsibility for your actions and do it?

Or are you going to stay hiding in the complex webs of sin in which you’ll probably never be proved guilty of anything, but you’ll never break free of anything either. Inside that web we are so good at convincing ourselves - and we don’t even know we’re doing it most of the time - convincing ourselves that we haven’t done anything really wrong because we can’t see much harmful effect on anyone.

But the truth is that the web of causes and effects is so complex that you usually can’t see the impact of your actions. When the book of Deuteronomy said that the sins of the fathers would be visited on their children and their children’s children, it wasn’t talking about punishment; it was talking about consequences.

As one writer put it:

“Even religion has done a great job of creating places for us to hide. Fundamentalist approaches to God’s law are great covers for rampant sin. “There is nothing in the Bible that says I can’t do this, therefore I can, regardless of the effect on those around me.”

Preachers may be criticised for going soft on sin when they don’t trot out the old rules and apply them the old way. Some people hear or read church statements on personal morality and human sexuality and think its very lax and you can get away with anything because there is no blanket condemnation of things like homosexuality or sex before marriage.

But if you think through the implications of what's said in those statements about equality of power and mutuality of respect, loyalty and love, and apply it to most of the relationships you can observe around you, you will discover that they are actually critical of not only a lot of homosexual practice and most sex outside of marriage, but probably most sex inside marriage too.

There is an awful lot of abusive and dehumanising treatment of other people that goes on, both overt and subtle, that is utterly sinful but which you can find no biblical injunction against.

“What a wretched person I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”

If you're really ready to face up to both the sin that emerges from within you and the sin that shapes the structures in which you live and work, it's going to take a lot more than simplistic questions, “Have I looked at any pornographic images? Have I used any rude words? Have I taken the Lord's name in vain?” (And I don't for one minute make light of such things, please don't misunderstand me here! These are the type of issues we need to take seriously – but there are larger questions of sin and patterns of sin we need to examine, hence...)

It's going to take what Alcoholics Anonymous calls the Fourth Step in their “Twelve Step Programme” - taking a serious and searching inventory of yourself. It takes time to reflect, to search yourself, to shine the spotlight deeper and deeper. It takes a lot of guts and some very painful honesty to lay yourself bare before another person, let alone before God. And yet it is only in complete openness before God that we are going to find any hope. Where else can forgiveness and reconciliation be found? In the twisted webs of your life you can't ever find all the people you have ever caused any hurt to.

But you can go to the ultimate victim of it all. The one whose image is distorted with every twisted thought or action. The one whose beautiful creation is damaged with every hurt and pain. The one whose wrists are pierced again with every humiliation and wound inflicted. All of humanity and all of creation is united by God's presence. And every expression of our sinfulness and brokenness wounds a dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. Every hurt ever felt was felt deepest in the heart of God.

That is the reason we can still hope for redemption. Because, as the ultimate victim of our sin, Jesus is also the only one who can ultimately accept our apology and forgive us. This is not a let off from the need to search yourself and lay yourself open.

It's not much use seeking forgiveness and then just continuing to live in the same mess. Forgiveness is offered so that you can be freed and move on. And you'll never feel forgiven until you've come clean. You know yourself that you never feel very forgiving towards someone who comes to you and says, “I'm not sure that I've done anything wrong, but if I've hurt you in any way, I'm sorry.” If you wouldn't feel forgiving in the face of that, then don't expect to feel forgiven if that's all you offer Jesus.

If you want to be set free from the entrapment of sin, you'll have to step out and stand warts and all where you can be seen for who you are. I can tell you with absolute certainty that Jesus will accept you and welcome you into the family of the forgiven.

Lay it out in the open. You don't have to go around baring your soul to everyone – in fact, that may be very inadvisable.

The church continues to offer the sacrament of confession to God in the presence of a priest, for those who would find that helpful in terms of acceptance and reassurance. But to Jesus, to find love and trust and acceptance, get it out in the open. Stand before Jesus, stripped of delusion and pretence, mask cast away, and you will discover the unfathomable depths of mercy and love. No condemnation. Total acceptance.

(Next weeks: NT readings on Romans, including the passage from Paul at the beginning of Romans 8: “There is now no condemnation for those of us in Christ Jesus...”!)

Jesus is here now, inviting each one of us to unmask ourselves again and more fully, and to meet him at this table, where he lays himself open for us and offers himself to us in mercy and love.