

The Church Has Given Sin a Bad Name

Sermon by Christopher Rogers, Pentecost 15, September 1, 2024

Song of Solomon 2:8-13

Psalm 45

James 1:17-27

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

The church has given sin a bad name.

How many of you switched off when you heard the list of evil intentions in our gospel? Fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly.

Now I doubt any of you are particularly in favour of any of them, but whenever the church (or Jesus) rails against the evils of the world it often sounds 1) censorious of things people enjoy; and 2) hypocritical, because we are not always, or even usually, better than everyone else at avoiding sin.

The word itself has a tendency to sound judgmental, and to label particular acts as by their nature bad; anything around sex in particular.

The church has therefore been seen as not wanting anyone to have any fun; while itself committing gross abuses of trust, often because of suppressed sexuality coming out in grotesque, perverted forms. Any

authority the church (of any denomination) might have had, has therefore largely been abdicated.

And yet, we still have to talk about sin, much as we might want to avoid it, because it is part of human nature; and because, deep down our faith actually has a lot to teach us and to help us with.

In stark contrast to our gospel, our first reading, from the Song of Solomon, and our psalm, are full of beautiful erotic language, tying the blessing of God in with voluptuous, physical love:

My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice. ...

The fig tree puts forth its figs, and vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.

And

You are the fairest of men; grace flows from your lips,
because God has blessed you for ever.

The preface to the Church of England's marriage service prays that the couple might '*find the grace of God in one another.*'

That is what physical attraction does at its highest – in its tenderness and intimacy it shows us something of the glory of God, and indeed of His love for us.

The Church has plenty of value to teach us about the beauty of love in a committed relationship in a way which is often quite counter-cultural; and yet, as I have experienced, it so often harms by making such love seem an exclusive thing – I could not, for example, be married to my partner while I was a priest in the Church of England, and my area bishop insisted on calling him my friend, which caused deep pain.

As with so much in life, intention is everything. *‘If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless’*, as St James tells us. In other words, if your religion does not make you kind to others, it is of no value.

Now our gospel passage today, which is not on its face an easy one, has the same message for us. This is one of those passages that needs a bit of context.

The Pharisees say to Jesus, why do your disciples eat without washing their hands?

A fair question you might think, especially if you have young children.

But all that the law, in Leviticus, required was for priests to wash their hands when making a sacrifice: only priests; only their hands; and only when making a sacrifice.

But the Pharisees had added to the law *everyone’s* hands, when *eating*, as well as pots and utensils when they came from market. The word for ‘washed’ is actually more literally ‘dipped’, and lots of manuscripts also

include beds. Now I don't know how many of you dip your beds in water, but I think that is to emphasise how silly the Pharisees' rules had got, and how far from Leviticus they were.

By adding to God's laws, by making them *impossible* for God's people to follow in fact, the Pharisees were committing a far bigger sin: putting a stumbling block before God's children. And it is because this is breaking the Law far more profoundly than any silly rules, that they are called hypocrites.

More fundamentally however, I think these man-made rules were also wrong because they separated people from their neighbour, and from God, in the same way that the Church's attitude to sex has so frequently done. They told people to wash things when returning from the market because that is where Jews would encounter Gentiles, not because it's generally hygienic or to wash pesticides and bugs off, as we might do.

It might sound like a good idea on the face of it, but again, it's the intention that matters, and the effect.

In other words, it's not the food itself - the thing going into the mouth as Jesus puts it, but what's coming out from the heart.

This is the same point that James is making: unless you're actually helping others – caring for orphans and widows in his case – what's the point?

There's another truth in what Jesus says here, and that is that when we harm others, or seek to put ourselves above others, or use others for our own purposes, rather than valuing them as individual people – when we sin, in other words – yes, those things come from *us* and harm *them*; but they also end up poisoning us by their reflux. Because sin is what separates us from God and neighbour.

Most of us will recognise this as true, I think. Even if the Church has forfeited its authority, if we can only excavate beneath the failings of so many in her hierarchy, there is actually great wisdom there.

It is no accident that the 12 step programme which has changed the lives of so many millions over the years follows the same teaching:

- admitting our own powerlessness over our addictions;
- turning ourselves over to God;
- being honest about our failings and asking God to help us move beyond them;
- making amends to those we have hurt.

It may be that 'sinfulness' is a slightly more helpful word for us than 'sin', because it acknowledges that this is a tendency we all have, because we are human. That's really all St Augustine meant when he came up with the idea of original sin – this is something we inherit because we can't help but sin.

And once we accept our own helplessness, and admit that only God can change us (because that is really what repentance – another fierce-sounding word – is), then, and only then, can we actually be open to changing.

The worst thing we can do actually, is to give up, and resign ourselves to never being able to change – something many have said is the unforgiveable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. In other words, denying God the chance to work transformation – *resurrection* even - in us.

Today's gospel message might be a challenging one – we prefer to avoid those parts of ourselves we are ashamed of, which we prefer to leave hidden in the dark. But today's gospel message is also a hopeful one – it is saying that if we open ourselves to the grace of God, we cannot but be changed.

Rather than denying those aspects of yourself that you don't like, try praying *with* them to God. Invite God in, own up to whatever tarnishes the image of God in you, and ask God for change.

Because that turning, that transformation, that conversion of life, is our vocation. You might even say it is what we are made for.

Amen