



A Question of Sin

It is one of the inevitable realities of ministry that ministers are going to be asked at some point: "What is sin?"

The concept of sin is an interesting one in the modern world. Indeed, it is one which many 21st century Christians are deeply uncomfortable with, not least because there appears to be something old-fashioned and fuddy-duddy about "sin". It conjures up notions of busy-body puritans poking their nose into other people's private lives - or of flint-eyed fanatics who believe they have the right to condemn others and pass judgement on those of whom they don't approve. Certainly, the idea of "sin" is often linked to the many and varied ways in which Christians have behaved unkindly or even oppressively toward others.

Indeed, so uncomfortable are many Christians with the idea of sin that I know one minister who refused to use the word "sin" in any of his services, on the grounds that it alienated people and might dissuade "seekers" from the life of faith. In other words, the concept of sin is, for many people, linked to rejection, judgementalism, and an intolerable intrusion of one's privacy.

I have been asked this question many times in my own ministry, and I have always found it a struggle to respond. On the one hand, I don't want to follow the reductionist approach that simply says sin is "behaving badly" or doing something "naughty" which gives us pleasure. This kind of reductionism is all-too-often linked to the kinds of puritanical (and prudish) approaches to sex and

sexuality that I personally find repellent, precisely because they are so often inhuman in their consequences. On the other hand, I don't want to dismiss the idea of sin, because it is in many ways central to Christian anthropology - that is to say, a Christian understanding of what it means to be human. One of the key ways in which Christian faith understands human beings is that we are all sinners.

Of course, this understanding has its critics. Those who reject or critique religious faith will often accuse Christianity of having an understanding of human beings that casts them as "impure", as somehow "spoiled" or "defective" - an understanding that gives rise to the evils of judgmentalism and rejection and self-loathing, and all the harms that result.

Personally, however, I dismiss this accusation precisely because the Christian understanding of creation - including humankind - is that it is "good". That is to say, it has beauty and value and meaning and purpose in the eyes of God; God loves the "good creation" that is, after all, the product of God's upwelling love. More to the point, in the person of Christ, God became one of us in order to share our humanity and join it irrevocably to the life of God. That in itself is an act of esteem that powerfully demonstrates God's love for, and solidarity with, us all.

But if this is the case, what, then, is sin? Simply put, it seems to me that sin is our collective complicity in the suffering and violence and injustice of the world. We are all of us complicit, in different ways and to different degrees, with the harms that destroy human relationships, that damage the non-human ecology, and which become the sources of injustice and dehumanisation. Because we are all sentient, rational beings, we all make choices - and often the choices we make are self-interested or harmful or inconsiderate or have unexpected consequences. We don't always deliberately make negative choices; but we do often make choices that have negative outcomes.

Put another way, in much the same way that none of us gets through this life without getting scarred by others, none of us gets through this life without scarring others, either. However unintentional, however indirect or second-hand, we are all of us the cause of - or are complicit in - the suffering of others. Sin, understood from the standpoint of Christian faith, is our shared complicity in this reality.

All of which might make us feel rather gloomy and depressed were it not for the fact that God loves us - unconditionally. And by "loves" I don't mean in some abstract sense - I mean that God has already taken a good long look at us and declared us worthy of God's love. We are "good" in the eyes of God, and God will do whatever it takes - including becoming human and suffering the injustice of death at our hands - in order to make that love apparent to us. God has declared us full of dignity and worth and value, our sin notwithstanding. Indeed, rather than viewing us as "corrupt" or "broken", God sees us all as manifestly beautiful and deserving of love.

The point being that the Christian doctrine of sin is ultimately a cause for hope. It doesn't condemn or judge - it simply holds up an honest mirror to the question of what it means to be human. We are none of us perfect, or plaster saints. We are none of us innocent. We have all of us caused harm or done damage. But what God wants from us as a response is not sackcloth and ashes and self-loathing, but simply that we be honest about that: to acknowledge where we have gone wrong, and to commit to trying once again to live the kind of relational lives with one another that God seeks with us. The Christian doctrine of sin isn't there to remind us that we are "fallen" or "unworthy"; on the contrary, it is to remind us that we are loved - by God - unconditionally precisely because we are worthy in God's eyes; and that, as a consequence, we should try and love one another, too.

Combined Services For January 24

Just as we did for January this year, there will be combined services for Ringwood and Heathmont in January 2024. The schedule is as follows:

Jan 14th: Combined @HUC

Jan 21st: Combined @RUC

Jan 28th: Combined @HUC

Please note that all services **start at 10am.**

A Reminder About COVID-19

You may have seen in recent weeks a number of news stories about an upsurge in COVID-19 infections and an increase in the rate of hospitalisations that have occurred as a result.

It appears that a number of sub-strains of the Omicron variant have emerged, and that these are considerably more infectious than previous variants. In particular, they appear to target the elderly and the immuno-compromised, who make up the vast bulk of recent admissions to hospital.

Please give thought to getting a booster vaccine shot if it's been more than six months since your last shot, and/or to taking necessary precautions in social situations in which there are likely to be large numbers of people in a confined area.

Blessings,

Brendan



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