

## Sermon Sunday 02 July 2023 - Malcolm Brookbanks

Some years ago I was in a Bible study group when the subject of sin cropped up. One member of the group announced that she had never sinned in her life. There was stunned silence for some seconds and then we embarked on a discussion of what sin is and whether various sins had different values for example is murder a greater sin than stealing.

Our sinless group member said she thought sin was breaking any of the Ten Commandments. Well yes breaking those rules is sinful but they are integral to the expectations which fall within the new commandments Jesus gave us to love the Lord our God with all our hearts with all our strength and all our mind and to love our neighbour as ourselves. So sinning becomes doing, saying or even thinking anything that will defy these commandments and is therefore, displeasing to God.

This morning we have in the reading from Romans a lecture by St Paul on the matter of sin and what rules we should live by. He uses the word sin eleven times in twelve verses because the law for the Israelites, as set out in the first four books of the Old Testament, defines how the people of God should live and failure to keep these laws, of which there were 600 or so, meant that they sinned but not only that they were shackled to sin as slaves. However, atonement for sins could be bought through sacrifice of an animal.

We should remember that the Old Testament law is about a covenant, a binding contract between two parties in which both sign up to certain obligations in this case God and the Israelites.

Now Paul had become aware that Jewish converts to Christianity were insisting that non Jewish converts were expected to go through the same initiations as converts to Judaism and had to obey all the old laws. Practically it was impossible for anyone to obey all the laws especially in places like Rome where there is no temple or central sanctuary on whose altar you could offer a sacrifice. So Paul is pointing out that Jesus brought in a new covenant which wasn't restricted to the people of Israel but embraced everyone and he tells his readers that the old has been swept away and a new beginning is at hand.

In 2019 Angela Merkel addressed the students at Harvard University. In her address she said, 'The moment when you step out into the open is also a moment of risk taking. Letting go of the old is part of a new beginning. And she recalled the dead end she witnessed in the Berlin Wall that once divided her homeland, and staring down the walls of populism and nationalism rising up throughout the world these days, called the graduates of Harvard to see these walls as dead ends. But she added a word of hope: letting go of the old is part of a new beginning. There is no beginning without an end, no day without night, no life without death.' She believed that time and again we need to be prepared to keep bringing things to an end in order to feel the magic of new beginnings and to make the most of opportunities.'

Paul speaks in a similar way saying that in the death of Christ, there is a call to newness of life. It is this new life that we are baptised into and that we are called to walk in. And he asks the question in verse 15, 'Should we sin because we are not under the law but under grace?' In repeating this question which he raised in verse 1 Paul is advancing his point on what it means to not be bound under the Law of Moses. In this he says we should not abuse God's vast and dependable grace by continuing to do those things which rob ourselves and others of the fullness of life.

Put simply we're not to take God for granted. So if sin is whatever robs us and our neighbours of fullness of life, then what we need is a new beginning and Paul believes following Jesus invites us to that new beginning and calls us to work alongside God for fullness of life.

And so in that new life we sin when we think or do or say things which are unloving toward God and others. In our Gospel reading Jesus is telling us to practice that well known saying- "Do unto others as you would be done by". He gives the example of giving a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple'. A cup of cold water is a gift that everyone can give because it is the smallest of gifts. But even then it is precious to the person receiving it, because sometimes it is the gift of life and that still remains the case for many today.

When we care for people, we show the love Jesus demonstrated to us when he lived among us. When we serve others, we serve Jesus, just like Jesus and his disciples served others. But it isn't always easy. We like our old ways and habits and sometimes we need a jolt to make us realise where we are in our relationship with God. Take for instance the successful man known for his generosity who was driving his new car through a slum area. A boy tried to flag him down but the man didn't want to get involved, so he pretended he didn't see the child. As he slowed for a red traffic light, he heard a loud crash. Someone had thrown a brick at his car, denting the boot.

The man stopped, jumped out of his car and grabbed the boy that threw the brick. "You juvenile delinquent!" he yelled. "You'll pay for this or go to prison!"

"I'm sorry, mister," the boy cried. "My mum's lying on the floor at home. I think she's dying. We don't have a phone and I've been trying for ten minutes to get someone to stop. I didn't know what else to do! Take me to prison, but please, call a doctor for my mum first."

The man was filled with shame. "I'm a doctor," he said and asked, "Where is she?" The boy took him to his mother and the doctor administered CPR and called an ambulance.

"Will she live?" the boy sobbed. "Yes, son, she will," the doctor said. "Then it's worth going to prison. I'm sorry I ruined your car." "You're not going anywhere," the doctor said. "It was my fault you had to throw a brick to get my attention."

The doctor made sure the boy was taken care of, and as he drove home he resolved not to fix the dent. He would keep it as a reminder that not everyone in need has a brick to throw.

(Pause)

Even small gifts can make a big difference. It is a reminder of the old adage that "big things come in small packages". To offer hospitality, care and compassion, we simply have to bring who we are, what we have to where we're at. It requires attention to the person receiving the hospitality. We have to receive the person first before they can receive the benefit of the gift we offer.

To Jesus, hospitality meant acceptance, even those who, in his society and in his day, were deemed to be unacceptable. This is why he put his arms around lepers, ate with tax collectors

and sinners, forgave adulterers and broke Sabbath laws. Hospitality was not only important to Jesus, it was at the very heart of being God, and it didn't make any difference to him where such hospitality took place, or to whom, or on what day.

When it comes to hospitality, we take turns being the host and being the guest. Sometimes we are the ones who simply need the hug or cup of water and kindness. Other times, we are the ones providing the hug or cup of water. The "little ones" Jesus refers to are frequently the scapegoats or victims in our society. They are the powerless, the weak, the hurting, the abused, the abandoned, the elderly or children, and they are often the easiest targets for our wrath. They need the help and compassion that Jesus offers through us. When we help them, we have the power to bring others into a relationship with God, the power to show others God's love by showing them our love, the power to bring them face to face with God by bringing them face to face with us. Amen