

Sermon preached by the Priest Pastor  
St Marylebone Parish Church  
Choral Healing Service 1<sup>st</sup> March 2020

The church has been criticised in the past for talking too much about sin. It's an old fashioned word, with a self righteous feel. Rightly, we would rather focus on the more positive aspects of our faith, love, peace and joy. But as the season of Lent begins it is an opportunity to be reminded of the frailty of our humanity and our need of a saviour. Tragically, we cannot avoid this reality when we see the news; the social and structural sin that oppresses millions; the sin of manipulation and sexual abuse that pollutes both the movie industry and the church.

It is particularly odious and devastating when people of faith who many have revered are discovered to have used their position to abuse the vulnerable, sometimes, shockingly, justifying it on spiritual grounds. We can only then call it out for what it is, sin and evil and to make reparation, give justice to the victims and work harder to prevent it.

But sin lurks within every human heart. Human beings, though created in the image of God, have an innate propensity to sin. That's what the story of Adam and Eve describes; even if we're in paradise, we tend to want to push the boundaries, go beyond what is acceptable.

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, said St Paul in Romans 3:23.

It's true that the doctrine of Original Sin has sometimes led to negativity and legalism over the years. That has led people to question it.

The fourth century monk Pelagius suggested that it is possible for human beings to live completely good lives without necessarily needing the grace of God, if they just try hard enough. It was decided that this was a pretty unrealistic view, and was denounced as heresy. History of course, backs up the orthodox Christian position. But it's an attractive heresy and pops up from time to time in other guises.

It's true that as we look at the story of human beings on this earth, we *can* see the image of the divine through human love, self-giving, courage, righteous acts and creativity. We all, as children of God, possess the divine spark. Inevitably, however, we can also see human beings acting with selfishness, cruelty, violence, greed, and injustice.

In a way, I find the doctrine of original sin strangely comforting. It is realistic about what it is to be human.

We are never going to be perfect through our own efforts. That's rather a relief – God knows we are going to mess up now and then. Even in the most holy monastery, far away from any temptation, when the whole of life is centred on prayer and worship there too original sin lurks. God knows we need a saviour, and he has sent one. One who knows what it is like to be fully human but without sin.

Jesus models to us the life that is completely free from sin, and deals with the fact that our lives are rarely like that, in his own body on the cross.

That is why it is so hugely wrong to impute the totally opposite motivation for Jesus' acts of forgiveness and healing. He did these things through the Holy Spirit of divine love. To suggest this was sorcery or satanic as we heard in the gospel reading was very serious indeed.

Incidentally, if someone is worried that they might have committed what is described as the unforgivable sin, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, it's almost certain they haven't. What Jesus is talking about is the persistent, wilful, hardhearted rejection and slander of his ministry. Critique the misdoings of the institutional church by all means, but slag off the spirit of Jesus and the Holy Spirit within it at your peril.

Every time we repent from sin and **do** receive God's forgiveness and healing, we must intentionally fill our lives with the good things he gives us, rather than leave a vacuum. You may remember Luke 11 where the unclean spirit has gone out of a man and returns to a clean and swept soul worse than before.

Nature abhors a vacuum but the devil sees it as a great opportunity.

We need to intentionally fill the swept and tidy space with daily personal prayer, the sacraments, worship, spiritual conversation and fellowship, reading the bible and acts of loving service.

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. But St Paul goes straight on to say they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. It's a wonderful gift to know that the sins we have committed knowingly or unknowingly, in the past and in the future are forgiven when we turn to Christ.

So that when we are confronted with our weakness, instead of turning inwards to self-hate, we can turn upwards with gratitude and repentance, and outwards with understanding love towards our neighbour who is in the same position. As the words of the spiritual put it 'O happy day, when Jesus washed my sins away. He taught me how to watch and fight and pray, and living rejoicing every day.' Thanks be to God.