

BIBLE READINGS: Isaiah 40: 1 – 11 Mark 1:1-8

SERMON

Heaven, hell, death and judgment. The ancient, traditional themes of Advent. The four last things. And what a gloomy list it is. Well, the first on the list is all right – heaven – but after that it's downhill all the way. Hell, death, judgement.

It puts me in mind of that wonderful preacher in Stella Gibbons' satire, *Cold Comfort Farm* – Amos Starkadder. He was the preacher at the Church of the Quivering Brethren. His job was to make them quiver, and, boy, was he good at it! Here he is in fine form.

'Ye miserable crawling worms, are you here again, then? Have ye come like Nimshi, son of Rehoboam, secretly out of your doomed houses to hear what's coming to ye? Have ye come, old and young, fit and well, matrons and virgins (if there is any virgins among ye, which is not likely, the world being in the wicked state it is), old men and young lads, to hear me telling of the great crimson licking flames of hell fire? ... Have ye come, dozens and hundreds of ye like rats to a granary, like field mice when there's harvest home? And what good will it do you?... Nowt, not a flicker of a whisper of a bit of good.' He paused and drew a long breath, then suddenly ...thundered at the top of his voice: 'Ye're all damned!'"

They don't make preachers like that any more! And just as well, I hear you say! I don't suppose any of us are sorry that hell-fire and damnation are out of fashion today. Most Christian preaching these days is much more upbeat and positive, rather than banging on endlessly about sin, guilt and repentance, and I'm glad about that.

But there's always a danger, isn't there, that we throw out the baby with the bathwater. In our keenness to emphasize the positive, we risk losing something of real value that lurked in those unappealing messages of sin and guilt. We can easily end up with nothing more than a "feel good" faith – one in which we proclaim that we are all fine as we are, affirming the goodness in everyone and celebrating our gifts. And if that is all we have, we won't be able to see where there is still work to be done. We'll end up with a faith like fairyfloss, a sweet tasting mouthful that melts to nothing. It's nice at the time – but you can't live on it.

The truth is that sin and guilt are real and powerful forces in our lives and our world, whether we want to acknowledge them or not. "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves" says John in one of his letters. There is no one here who hasn't at some point spoken words which hurt, acted in ways that were destructive, done things which we hope no one will find out about, and there are some around us who live with dreadful memories. The moment of carelessness while driving that caused a terrible accident, the affair that wrecked a marriage and broke up a home, the malicious gossip that drove another person to despair. We may not believe that such things will be punished with "great crimson licking flames of hell fire", but these things make a hell of our own devising, for us and for others.

Sin is real; guilt is a message to us that we have done wrong – a message we need to hear. But it is hard for us to face this, and our society doesn't encourage us to learn to either. We live in an age which has proclaimed that "love means never having to say you're sorry", where admitting responsibility when we have done wrong is taboo. "Never apologize, never explain" is the mantra. There are many reasons why, as a society we have drifted into this denial. But I think one of the main ones is that many people don't know what to do with their sin and guilt once they have acknowledged it. Having done wrong there is nothing that can be done to sort it out. Those of us who come to church week by week should be used to the idea of confession and forgiveness. All our services include some recognition that "we have sinned against God and against our neighbour". The language of the Book of Common Prayer is even stronger. We have "erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep". We come "bewail[ing] our manifold sins and wickedness".

And having owned up to our sin we hear God's promise of forgiveness. Yet often even we, regular churchgoers, don't believe what we say and hear. The words go in one ear and out of the other, making no real difference to us. But many who don't come to church never even get a chance to hear these words. Where else today are you encouraged to own up to your sins and hear that they are forgiven on any regular basis? And without the permission and encouragement to do this it is easy to see how sin and guilt feel like things you are stuck with forever. And for many, as the Book of Common Prayer puts it "the burden...is intolerable". No wonder people would rather pretend that it wasn't their fault, that they are perfect.

Every cruel word we speak, every destructive act, leaves its legacy in our lives. Like stones in a sack, each one leaves us with a weight to carry. Over the years the sack gets heavier and heavier. Some people have huge boulders of guilt to bear. For others the stones are small, but add them together and they are still often a heavy burden. I have met people so weighed down by the past that they can hardly move at all. They find themselves rooted to the spot. Their regrets paralyze them. They are powerless to move on from that moment of betrayal, carelessness, or folly.

Some cope by trying to throw their stones at others, trying to blame anyone but themselves. But it doesn't work. However many stones they throw, their burden is still as heavy. Others try to deny their burdens, hiding them, refusing to talk about them, but you can see the weight in their eyes, pulling them down. Through our sins and wickedness we are grievously hindered in running the race that is set before us. We can't go back and undo what we have done, but weighed down with regrets we can't go forward either.

That's why I think, despite the negative tone of words like sin, guilt and repentance, these are things that we need to talk about. "Feel-good" faith is not enough. We need real change, real hope, real liberation, real goodness to take root in us. And that doesn't come until we acknowledge what is wrong.

The Psalmist said... "Mercy and truth have met together". Mercy and truth seem unlikely bedfellows. Truth often doesn't seem merciful – it speaks as it finds. And mercy, as we tend to think of it, is often not truthful. It's a matter of making excuses, of kind lies and gentle evasions. But the Bible is right. It is only when the two come together - when we can see the reality about ourselves, but see it through the eyes of an endlessly loving and forgiving God, that our lives can begin to be transformed.

John the Baptist calls people to repentance. A wild man in a wild desert, he is an uncompromising preacher, preaching a challenging message. It's a far cry from the stories which begin Luke and Matthew's Gospels. There's no adorable baby in a manger here, no shepherds and angels, just this call to see ourselves as we are and to repent. Yet Mark insists that it is here that the "good news of Jesus Christ" begins, as we bring to God the things which warp and twist our lives, the sins which weigh us down, and ask him to help us deal with them.

Some preachers would say that God does this by taking away The burden of our sins, putting it out of reach, somewhere where we'll never have to think of them again. Leave your sins at the foot of the cross, they say. But that's not an image that has ever really worked for me. It seems to me that our sins, our weaknesses, our mistakes are as much a part of us as our strengths and successes. They are part of our stories, part of what has made us who we are. Trying to forget them, leaving them behind, even in God's hands, is to cut off part of our lives and that makes us smaller people.

That seems to me to be a waste – and it doesn't seem to me to be true to what actually happens when I face my sin. My experience of God's forgiveness has been that instead, as we look at our burdens with him, they are transformed. They become things from which we learn, rather than things which simply weigh us down. We learn that however bad it is, our sin doesn't destroy God's love for us. We learn that, although we can't undo the past, the future is still full of new possibilities. We learn that what just looked like a burden can, in fact, be a building block, a foundation for the future, an experience which changes and strengthens us. And gradually that crushing weight becomes a rich resource instead.

It takes guts to live like this, of course. Guts and practice. Which is why sin and guilt need to be faced – confronted, regularly! They need to become a part of our day to day awareness. As we deal with them, turning to God in repentance, we hear again the tender message of his love for us, and the powerful message of his healing, and that's a message that we all need to hear.

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