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Lent 4C

Sermon notes on Psalm 32

Rev Dr Craig Thompson

Auburn and Kew UCA

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The happy sinner is the forgiven sinner

Our poet declares, "Happy are those whose transgressions are forgiven, and whose sin is put away" (63.1). As we have noted before, sin has a bad name these days in the churches, and certainly outside of them. It seems too pessimistic, too "down" on human beings. And so we have developed a tendency away from the language of sin to something which seems to us to be more moderate – perhaps "brokenness" or something similar. But simply changing that language to something which seems a bit more palatable isn't going to get us very far if it is simply palatability which we are searching for. We have no trouble working out for ourselves what we would like to think about ourselves; the question which matters here is what God thinks about us.

But even this is not easy to state, because we have a very strong tradition which begins with sin as a fundamental human characteristic, and so imagines or proclaims that "what God thinks of us" *is* that we are sinners and must repent. Whatever might be said about the truth of this, it is not the gospel, despite how often it turns up in churchly moaning about the state of the world.

The problem with most of the church's talk about sin is that it usually comes too soon. In fact there is a sense in which all doctrine and dogma – including doctrines of sin – is just such a "talking too soon". This is unexpected because such doctrinal exposition is usually long and laboured and "after-the-event". But the too-soon-ness of our talk of doctrine is that we haven't yet had the experiences which warrant the theological language, and give it meaning for us. And so too often *all we have* is the words – sin, God, salvation, whatever – and nothing to hang them on. This is just the kind of malady which infects most of our public talk about God – and not least that which is being conducted with great gusto in our city this weekend.

In the case of sin, the talking too soon results in the suggestion that you have to know yourself to be a sinner in order to believe in God. But this is a repulsive suggestion, if the grace of God is not yet part of our experience. For "evangelism" then becomes an *attack* on those we might approach – a basic accusation that they are not yet good enough as human beings: you are a sinner, and in need of God. This is not much different from hearing that I am too short and need to be stretched, too ugly and need to be covered up,

too black and in need of being whitened. Seen from the right perspective it might well be true that I am a sinner, but the news is scarcely appealing to anyone who has no sense of *needing* to be saved apart from hearing the Christian who is busy telling her how bad her life is. "Sin" is a word too often used too soon, and so becomes either a destructive word because it is cut off from the source of its life, or a wasted one because it is rejected outright as impossible and deathly.

But in our Psalm this morning, quite a different dynamic is being played out. The psalmist certainly speaks of sin, and generalises his sense of own sinfulness as something others also know of themselves. But the energy behind his talk of sin comes not from a theory about human life – whether or not we are basically good or basically bad – but from a conviction that God is merciful. Not sin of the poet, but the mercy of God, is the main event. And so the psalmist does not speak too soon, but very much after the event: "you forgave the guilt of my sin". Certainly the psalmist speaks of having kept silent about his sin, avoiding it as if it could be kept from God. But even here I suspect that he has not yet really seen his sin for what it was: a force which "dried up [his strength] as by the heat of summer" (v.4). For, by simply imagining that it *could* be kept from God he imagined also that he himself would not be affected by it. Yet in the end he sees, from the perspective of forgiveness, just what a hold his "brokenness" had had on him.

But the important point is that it is from the perspective of transgression which is forgiven, of sin which is covered, that the psalmist speaks. Knowledge of sin, and of its true affect on us, *follows* knowledge of God, and does not precede it. And the knowledge of God it follows is the knowledge of God as merciful, as willing and able to set right what is wrong in our lives. There is nothing to be gained from a kind of Christian pessimism which bemoans the state of the world or the state of the church, which sees sin everywhere and accuses the world for its failings. Indeed there is much failure and much sin – in the church and in the world. But the way out of it is not analysis or accusation or fearful "just in case" repentance. We need what the psalmist has known: an experience of mercy which reveals to us what we have been, a hiding place which protects us from our own self-deception and untruth. What the world needs now is not a clearer image of its failures; such images are to be found in glorious flat-screen colour on our TVs

each night. What we need is the experience of wholeness which comes from being drawn in by God, and which casts our brokenness as a thing of the past and not of our future. For who, when discovering how she has failed, wants also to learn that this is not only her past but her future also?

When the psalmist declares that steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord (v.10) he calls us not simply to "believe in God", but to seek that experience of God which *creates the conditions* for trust. He trusts God not in the way of taking a "punt" on God but because, unexpectedly, he has experienced forgiveness. It was *unexpected* because otherwise he would not have tried to hide his sin from God and from himself but would rather have turned to God in the first place. It was *forgiveness*, because it revealed both the true depth of his failing and the true extent of God's love for him.

Our need is not for better understanding, or better language, or better liturgy or better whatever-else would seem to be the pressing problem which besets us. Our need is for God, because if we've got God – or God as got us – then we get *ourselves*, broken-and-restored. Everything else is just a diversion.

This, then, should be our prayer: that our souls might be satisfied as with a rich feast (Psalm 63.5), that then we might know what sin is and just how great the power and love of God has been to raise us up to new life. By the grace of God may this knowledge be ever growing in all his people. Amen.