

January 15, 2023

WHATEVER BECAME OF SIN

John 1:29-42

Whatever became of sin?

How often do we talk about sin - in our personal conversations and within our gatherings as a community of faith?

With every News Cycle, local and international, we are presented with instances of behaviours and actions that are brutal, uncaring, unprincipled and selfish. We watch the news reports on TV and shake our heads in disbelief. There may be some momentary outrage, but we soon move on, going about our business as usual. And whenever these behaviours and actions are discussed and analysed within our communities of faith, they are labelled as everything else but sinful – sin is never mentioned in any of those discussions.

In both our public and private discourse, it seems as though the word sin has disappeared from our vocabulary. And it leaves me to wonder why. Is it that people have stopped sinning? Is it that we are not as bothered about it as much anymore? Or is there some other reason?

Among the reasons that may exist, I get the distinct impression that many people avoid speaking of sin because it makes them uncomfortable, and it often makes others uncomfortable as well.

The primary factor that gives rise to such discomfort, is a common but inadequate understanding of sin. For many, sin is reduced to perceived personal moral failings. Such an understanding of sin often gives rise to a judgemental approach to others, and people don't like to be made to feel that they are being judged, nor do people like to be labelled as judgemental. So for many, it is better not to talk about sin.

People who feel that they are being judged often feel that they do not belong, they are not welcome, they are not good enough. And there is also the real harm that judgementalism can cause because Judgement is almost always followed by condemnation. We see how such judgement followed by condemnation played out in the story of the woman caught in adultery. (John 8: 1-11) It ended with Jesus saying to the woman "*Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned*

you?’¹¹ She said, ‘No one, sir.’ And Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.’”

In addition, because judgementalism almost inevitably leads to condemnation, it runs counter to the ministry and message of Jesus.

John 3: 16-17 ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.’ 17 ‘Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

So we can understand why some people would rather not talk about sin, and why some communities of faith have all but removed the word from their vocabulary. It can cause great discomfort.

But to dismiss and disregard the reality of sin is to misunderstand and misinterpret the human condition, as well as to devalue the message and ministry of Jesus.

We just recently celebrated the birth of Jesus, and when the angel of God broke the news to Mary that she was going to give birth, the angel said to her: “*You are to name him Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins.*” (Matthew 1: 21)

And in the Gospel lesson read today, John the Baptist, announcing the presence of Jesus, declared: “*Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.*” (John 1: 29).

The link between the coming of Christ and the sin of humanity is also expressed in many of the Christmas hymns that we love to sing, for example:

Joy to the world (Third verse)

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
nor thorns infest the ground:
He comes to make His blessings flow
far as the curse is found.

Hark the Herald Angels sing (First verse)

Hark! the herald angels sing,
“Glory to the new-born King,
peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!”

It came upon the Midnight Clear (Verse 3)

Yet with the woes of sin and strife
 the world has suffered long;
 beneath the angel strain have rolled
 two thousand years of wrong.

The Bible is quite clear that the reason for Christ's coming is to offer humanity a way out of the brokenness caused by sin. Should we discard the whole concept of sin because it can cause discomfort? If that is the case, we might as well discard the entire Bible, because the message of the Bible is for the most part radical and revolutionary, and any message or movement that is radical and revolutionary is bound to cause discomfort.

We can only truly appreciate the human condition, and the significance of Christ's coming when we acknowledge the reality of sin. But first, we have to come to a fuller understanding of what sin is.

What is sin?

As mentioned before, for many people, when they think of sin, they understand it to mean those habits and actions that are frowned upon by society as immoral. But sin is more than that. Sin is missing the mark of our true humanity made in the image of God. Sin speaks of brokenness and falling short of what is good and right, just and loving.

Sin is a condition of disorder that affects all of us. It results in alienation, hostility, selfishness, greed, abuse, cruelty, indifference, and acts of injustice carried out by those who are so blinded by power and greed that they cannot see themselves in those whom they victimize, making them incapable of loving their neighbour as they love themselves. The disorder of sin ultimately results in separation.

The wages of sin is death – not just physical, but also the death of relationships, kindness, goodness, compassion and love.

That's the reality of sin. It is a disorder that we cannot cure by ourselves, and which, if it is disregarded, only gets worse until it finally consumes and destroys us.

That is why the coming of Christ is so important. In Christ, God offers us a way out of the brokenness, alienation and imprisonment that result from the guilt and power of sin. Christ offers us God's solution to the brokenness we cannot fix; the guilt we cannot bear; the evil which destroys us, and the wrongs which separate us.

So, whatever became of sin?

It remains a reality in our world, but a reality which does not have to control our thinking or shape our responses. A reality which does not have to define us or dominate us.

John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness offering a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”.

Repentance is a call to turn away from that which is life-denying and to turn to that which is life-affirming. To turn from that which results in brokenness to that which produces wholeness. It’s a call to turn towards God. And that is possible for us to do with the help of Christ, who came and will come again so that we can find our way back to God, that we may rediscover and reclaim our better selves, live in freedom, and share in communities of love, justice and peace.

So, friends, it is important that we recognise and confess the presence of sin. That we follow the way of Christ and set out on a path that will lead us away from what is wrong and destructive in our lives, and towards that which is right and good, so that we can open our lives to the freedom and newness that is possible through Christ.

*No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found,
Far as the curse is found.*

Thanks be to God!

Rev. Sydney Elias