



THE NEW SHOFAR

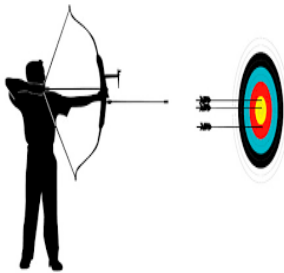
There is no point to the season of Lent if we are unable to acknowledge we are sinners

Lent 1

What is “sin?” – Does it exist?

If we want to define sin, the starting point must be the Bible’s perspective. Left to ourselves, we might well find ourselves to be sinless, and that is not possible, at least, according to Jesus...remember the story of the woman caught in the act of adultery? Jesus invited the mob – *let he who is without sin cast the first stone!* Not a single stone was thrown. The only one qualifying as a stone thrower was Jesus himself, and he was more in the business of mercy and forgiveness than stoning.

Our English word “sin” comes from the Old English term "syn" which is translated from Biblical Greek and Hebrew. It was used to indicate the action of missing the mark. In the original sense of New Testament Greek, "sin" is a failure in missing the mark, primarily in spear throwing. Hebrew *hata* "sin" originates in archery and literally refers to missing the "gold" at the centre of a target, but hitting the target.



What then is our target as disciples?

Of course, this all means little if we are unable to state what our target consists of. And further, what would a bull’s eye look like? For most of my life, the target was obedience. God's commandment was for righteousness. When God demanded how *we must be Holy as I am holy* we tended to measure holiness and righteousness in terms of the Ten Commandments. For the Jews, that was 613 Laws of the Torah. Striving to hit the target was easy to understand. Do not break any of the laws – either Old Testament or the teachings of Jesus. But that is not how the Bible speaks of righteousness and holiness. It is not what God revealed about the reasons for him creating in the first place.

Trying to work out the meaning of sin is not a new challenge. It has been a part of living under God from the very beginning. Adam and Eve sinned when they decided they had a better vision of what it meant to be a creature living in God’s Eden. St Augustine of Hippo could understand this kind of sin as being a way of living in God’s creation that does not meet God’s expectations. He went on to define sin as *a word, deed, or desire in opposition to the eternal law of God.* Sin is going against God and His perfect ways. Note, the real sin is not the action. Sin happens in the heart. What we do with our hands and our bodies are just enactments of that sin.

Sin and a sinful way of living

The Catholic catechism has a great deal to say about sin, tracing its meaning from the early days of Hebrew theology. In the Catholic tradition, sin is described as a stain or contagion, an interior disposition of selfishness, a disordered heart, a misguided will, an external act that violates a law or rule, a rejection of God, a power or force of evil, and a kind of social disorder. Just in those couple of lines there are ten varying understandings and the key thing to note is how only one of them refers to the breaking of a law. The others are all about actions and ways of living that corrupt and infect the human person. We live and act in ways God had not created us to be following. Sin begins with an understanding of the will of God and then moves onto whether or not we are meeting those divine expectations.

The Catechism speaks of sin within a broader understanding of the mission and ministry of Jesus. The Gospel proclaims the revelation of Jesus Christ as God's mercy to sinners, it speaks of sin only to invite men and women to the gift divine mercy and forgiveness. One of the overwhelming messages of Jesus' earthly ministry was the availability of God's grace and the forgiveness available for human sins. **But** (and I stress this little word) one important first step towards reception of forgiveness is the honest acknowledgement of one's sins.

Sin has consequences far beyond ourselves

We should never forget or underestimate a further dimension of sin. It has profound effects on our relationship to God, self, and others in the human community. Sin is first of all an "offense against God," for it involves a rejection of God's love for us. But sin is also a failure of authentic self-love, though this failure is more often characterized in the tradition as pride, self-exaltation, hubris or disobedience. Additionally, sin ruptures human relationships and threatens the common good. To sin is to fall short of our potential, missing the mark of our highest self and best quality of life. As the Catechism again puts it. *The mystery of sin is composed of a twofold wound, which the sinner opens in his own side and in the relationship with his neighbour. That is why we can speak of personal and social sin. Every sin is personal under a certain aspect; under another, every sin is social, insofar as and because it also has social consequences.*

And there we have our first and probably the most important challenge for us as we being the pilgrimage of Lent: how are we going to define sin? Then we need to apply that definition to our own daily living. Close together with this is the task to work out what the target is. For what are we aiming? What is the direction God is setting out for our lives? What does it look like? Then, what does missing the target mean for us.

We will only be able to come to an understanding of these questions when we live under our Lenten discipline – prayer, Bible study, fasting and charitable works.