



The trouble with genuine faith is that it costs something and there is something inside me, some selfish beast of a subtle thing that doesn't like that truth at all because it carries responsibility, and if I actually believe these things I have to do something about them. It is so, so cumbersome to believe in Jesus. Donald Miller

March 10th

Lent 4

Gospel John 3:14-21

### Sin is not that easily avoidable

St Paul spoke of the necessity of understanding the true nature of sin. God gave the Law to Israel, not to set down a series of dos and don'ts the people had to obey if they were to find life in the land of Canaan and to dwell in his presence. Paul understood it more as a kind of religious trellis offering support and propping for those striving to live in accordance with the way they were created by God and in tune with the Torah given to Moses on Mt Sinai. There are 613 individual laws in the Old Testament and each one of them serves to hold the tapestry of the faith community together. *"Live this way", said God, "and you will be in my presence and then you will know the meaning of "milk and honey" in your lives".* The laws helped men and women know and appreciate the limits to their individual sovereignty. They could not live according to their own desires, do things in the way they wanted to do things. The real truth for Paul was that the Torah/Law shaped them to be living under the divine rule of Yahweh, shone a light on who they were so that their neighbours could see the love, power and mercy of Israel's God and so come to Him.

But of course, the Law as a network of codes could never bring them a life of faithfulness given the nature of the sin of Adam and Eve and the impact it had on the way we made decisions on how we live. Law remains only skin deep – a commandment is broken, or it is not. Law, however, does not touch the deepest places in our hearts. It is one thing to lay out specific behaviours to avoid while prescribing others, but that is not guaranteed to inform our desires and motives.

### Sin is not all about physical actions

This is the way Jesus explains it: *You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell"* (Matthew

5:21-22). This is an example of just how difficult it becomes to live a life of Gospel faithfulness on our own. We need God and we need the prayerful help and support of fellow community members. It is partly why Church exists. It is a community of grace.

Jesus understands the law as being about loving God and loving others (Matthew 22:37-40). We all accept how it is reasonable to have a law forbidding murder but in what way is that law going to address the problem of anger and hatred in the heart that leads to murder? Jesus wanted His listeners to understand that to refrain from killing someone does not mean are free from the sin of murder!... *anyone who is angry with a brother or sister is now deserving of Judgment for the sin of murder.* Of course, some of us will deny that we are ever "angry", that our behaviour stops short of that kind of sin. That might be true until we take a look of what that word means in Greek.

### Let us be clear about anger

The anger about which Jesus is talking is **orge** (Greek) anger, an anger indicative of an abiding mind of resentment, of wallowing in some kind of lingering hurt. It is not the kind of suddenly rising anger (**thumos** in Greek) but is more lasting in its nature. We store it away in our hearts and relish the opportunities that arise for us to act out against the source of our **orge**-anger. This sits at the heart of our unwillingness to forgive, to seek reconciliation, to sacrifice the self for the good of others and the community. It is the kind of sin giving rise to gossip, calumny, slander and clandestine meetings of those who want to harm the "other" in some way. It is that lingering hurt that curdles within us and so easily turns into

bitterness and hatred. It leads to an attitude of self-righteousness where I am always the victim and the “other” the one to blame for all evil and hurt that comes my way. It is the most difficult of all sins to overcome and a major reason for our alienation from the loving and most merciful God who wills us all to live with him.

This kind of anger we direct towards others can be likened to a smouldering coal. All it needs to begin firing up again is a gust of wind. It is a bit like the anger of the older brother in the parable of the Good Samaritan...*he became angry and was not willing to go in...* According to the wisdom of the Proverbs: *For the churning of milk produces butter, and pressing of the nose brings forth blood; so the churning of anger produces strife* (Prov 30:33; 14:29-30). And then there is Ecclesiastes 7:9 with *Do not be eager in your heart to be angry, for anger resides in the bosom of fools!* If not addressed it will curdle the whole of our lives and bring misery and division to ourselves and to the entire faith community.

### **God takes the expectations seriously**

This is the way Jesus understood the true nature of sin. Not primarily about actions taken but the smouldering sin, the indulging in feelings and scenarios in our hearts. And it is not just about anger/murder. He went on to do the same with other sins. For instance, just because someone did not proceed with the physical act of adultery did not mean they were not guilty of immorality (**Matthew 5:27-30**).

Sin is more than the things we do or do not do. Sin is the fruit of what is going on in our unrepentant hearts. It grows out of lifestyles that marginalise the influence of God in what we are doing or saying. Jesus wanted everyone to know that managing sin by the avoiding the breaking of set laws was not going to cut it before his judgment throne.

It is about this time that it might be worthwhile adding another pathway for reflection in these final weeks of Lent. **Matthew 7:22-23:** <sup>22</sup> *On that day many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?”*

<sup>23</sup> *Then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.”* How does that translate to our own faith communities today? On that day many will say to me, ***“Lord, Lord, did we not go to Church every Sunday, take our place on parish committees, serve you on parish rosters, help out in the OP Shop and regularly give you \$20 on the offertory plate? And then I will declare to them: I never knew you, go away from me you evildoers!”***

What Jesus demands is a contrite spirit and a humble heart; that we love God by loving our neighbour; that we carry out judgment on this earth in the way in which we expect God to carry our judgment on us; that we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned...; that we forgive to the same degree we are happy for God to forgive us; that we are judged not by good intentions but by the fruit our Christian vocations produces for the needy world. The expectation of Jesus for His disciples is that we act, think, say and respond in the same way He did. No exceptions. When we fail, and fail we surely will, our response is to be one of repentance and not seeking to offer an excuse or to pin the blame on another.

This is a tough road to the Kingdom, but we have been warned... <sup>13</sup>*Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. <sup>14</sup>But small is the gate and narrow the way that leads to life, and only a few find it.* We might be able to “fake it till we make it” in some areas of life, but not in our response to the call to follow Jesus.

### **What then should we be doing?**

The answer to that is simple and universally applicable – come closer to Christ Jesus and it is the divine grace that envelops us that will empower us to be living as we ought. How do we manage that? Are we praying daily? We should be, including a form of night prayer where we examine our lives as disciples seek forgiveness, blessings on what we did for God and for others, and then ask for the gift of a good sleep so we wake in the morning to serve God all over again. Do we have daily Bible readings? We must if we are to be true disciples of Christ. Do that and the rest is in God’s safe and merciful hands. Trust Him.