

Homily for Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, 2020

Romans 7:15-25a

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In the Lutheran Church of Australia,

We have this set prayer for the confession of sins:

We confess that we are born in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought, word and deed, by what we have done and by what we have failed to do. We have not loved you with our whole heart, and we have not loved our neighbour as ourselves. We deserve your eternal punishment. For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your holy name. Amen.

If you come regularly to Bethlehem you've heard them many times before.

If you're a member here, you've joined with others in confessing them,

In making them your own.

Perhaps you've become so used to saying these words

That they no longer sound outrageous or shocking or confronting

But do you remember when you first heard them?

Or first really thought about them?

Or have you been questioned by a visitor

Who comes along and is surprised or shocked

about how we speak about ourselves?

After all, we are Christian people

People who have God's law

Who are taught the Ten Commandments

Who are generally good neighbours and citizens

Who try our best to treat others well

And to live well-ordered lives

Why do we regularly begin our services

By saying that we are *born as slaves to sin*?

That we *don't have the power to change ourselves*?

That we, Christian people, *have sinned*, in the last week

In the things we've thought, said, and done

That according to our own actions we deserve eternal punishment *from God*?

Well today from God's word I'll be proclaiming the Good News

That when we confess our sins
When we acknowledge the reality of our lives
We are not simply describing who we are
We are ultimately confessing the sort of saviour that Christ is
Jesus is the one who does for us what we can't do
He is the one who brings us out of slavery to sin
He is the one who gives us his Spirit
So that we may think, speak, and act in ways
That are radiant with the love of God
He is the one who has taken upon himself our condemnation
So that we may live as people declared innocent by God
And walk in a new way of life
In which our hope is in Christ
And our unity as God's people
Is not in what we can do
But in the free forgiveness we have from God in Christ

Let's listen to the first verses from today's reading:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

Now in the history of the church there's been a lot of controversy
About this passage: there have been a lot of questions that arise from it
Is St Paul talking about himself? Or is the 'I' standing for people in general?
Or perhaps for the people of Israel in particular?

If St Paul *is* talking about himself, is he talking about himself as a Christian?
Or is he describing his life before he was a Christian?

Good theological arguments can be made for different answers

I don't intend to go into the different interpretations in this sermon

(Although you might be interested to know that Luther, following St Augustine
Thought that St Paul *was indeed describing his life as a Christian person*).

Instead I want to draw your attention to one of the basic points of the passage
That is true no matter what path of interpretation we take

And that this that having God's law, knowing God's law
Even thinking that God's law is good and true and beautiful
Does not equate to keeping God's law
And it does not equate to keeping God's law
Because by nature – by what it is within us –
We simply can not do it

For example, St Paul speaks this way:

For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh.

St Paul here is not saying that the body is bad

After all, as Christian people we know that *the Word became flesh*

That the Son of God took on a human body

Affirming that God's creation was made good

That we as human beings are made in God's image

But St Paul is saying that we naturally live this bodily existence

Without trust in God, without fearing God above all things

Without expecting good things from God

Because we are born without trust in God

Because we naturally centre our lives *on anything other than the true God*

Things like money, or work, or the approval of other human beings

Or things like spouse or family or friends

Or even things like our own ability to be loyal to God or to the church

Because this is naturally who we are

God's law does not have the power to save us

It does have the power to show contradictions within us

This is what St Paul says when he considers God's law

From the point of view of 'the flesh'

From the point of view of our natural lack of trust in God

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

On the one hand there is the aspiration

To love God with all one's heart, mind, soul, and strength

There is the aspiration to love one's neighbour as oneself

Then there is the reality of what can be done without the Spirit

And that is the reality of sin: the reality of **fornication, impurity,**

licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing

These are the works of the flesh as St Paul describes them in Galatians 5

This leads St Paul to draw this conclusion from the fleshly point of view:

Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

Human strength cannot save us

God's law, when we receive it without true fear and love of God

Can only expose our weakness

Can only show the contradictions in our lives

Can only cause us shame and humiliation

But for St Paul, for us, the flesh

Our natural lack of fear and trust in God

Does not have the last word

Our Lord Jesus Christ does

Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

It is Christ Jesus our Lord who has power to save

He is the one who has fulfilled the law of God for us

He is the one who gives us the Holy Spirit

So that we may find peace

So that we may call on God as Father

So that we may bear our sufferings in patience

So that nothing in all creation may separate us

From the love of God in Christ Jesus

The way into this new way of life

The way into life of Spirit

Comes through the forgiveness that we have in Jesus Christ

This is what gives us hope, this is what gives us unity

We indeed have an outrageous confession of sin in our services

As we acknowledge the reality of our lives

According to what we can do by our own strength

But our confession is not the last word

Because we also have a bold declaration of forgiveness

In response to our confession of sins we do not hear words of rejection

We do not hear words of condemnation

Instead we hear words of grace and mercy

As a called and ordained servant of the Word I announce the grace of God to all of you. On behalf of my Lord Jesus Christ, and by his command, I forgive the sins of all of you who repent and believe in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Peace be with you.

Christ's word has the power to do what our flesh cannot do

It can bring us the forgiveness of sins, of peace with God

It is this word that has the power to save

So let's look to Christ Jesus, and listen to his word

And today, let us receive his body and blood

Given and shed for the forgiveness of sins

Let us let Jesus do for us what we cannot do for ourselves

Bring true life to our mortal bodies

Bring us reconciliation with God and with each other

Bring us into the resurrected life.

In Jesus' name. Amen.