

Sunday between 11<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> September [24]

Luke 15:1-10

Well the readings for this morning are a little heavy on sin, are they not? The sin of the Israelite people in turning away from God, then there is the description of St Paul in his first letter to Timothy of his former life of sin, his persecution of the Christians and his place before God as the first among sinners. Then there is the gospel account of Jesus being accused of being a sympathiser of sinners, even the suggestion of sin by association.

It is certainly a Sunday where we are to think carefully about sin! We could debate the relative seriousness of the sins committed in these three biblical passages, what was worse, turning from God, persecuting, and witnessing, even encouraging violence and death towards Christian people, or sitting with people who live less than perfect lives? It's fairly easy to get Jesus off the hook, guilt by association can't possibly be as serious as a sinful act itself, but the choice between the Israelites and Paul in his former guise of Saul is a little more difficult to distinguish. We could spend some considerable time putting forward arguments for and against both, but there really is no need. Thank goodness for that you might think!

The reason that this is all irrelevant is that in each of the stories the sin is forgiven by God. And by forgiven that is to say wiped clean, disappeared, as though it never happened. It is forgiven and forgotten. We often say, forgive and forget but it is harder than it sounds to truly forget when we have forgiven something of someone. If it's a wrong that has been forgotten, we should have a relationship with that person as though the incident that had troubled us had never happened. But how often are we really able to do that? It is more likely, in my experience, that we want to forgive, we really do, and we try to move on but things are still not right for a while afterwards, we need to build up trust and sometimes relationships are never what they were. Perhaps it is this aspect of our human nature that makes it so difficult for us to believe that God can and does forgive and forget.

There was once a teaching assistant at an Anglican school, a woman known to be a Christian with a deep faith but she didn't go to church regularly anymore and she didn't come forward for communion at the school services. The priest had a quiet word with her one morning after a school Eucharist and asked her would she like to take part in the service. The priest wanted to reassure her that it was ok for her to share communion with the school if she wanted to. She told that priest that the reason she didn't come forward at communion was that she was sinful and had done too much to feel brave enough to approach the altar of God. The priest was surprised and also saddened by this response, how it must be to live with the idea that you are too sinful to accept God's grace. The teaching assistant never was convinced to take part in communion although at least she had now come to hear the view of the priest that in fact it is because we are sinners that we need God.

We can never considered ourselves worthy by our own doing to approach God, but we can approach God in spite of our sins and because of God's grace and these readings we consider today are a good guide in this.

God was of course angry at the sin of the Israelites, he threatened their destruction on a number of occasions and through a great many of the prophets. And yet each time there was repentance it was enough to turn God from a path of destruction to a path of reconciliation with the people. There were consequences of their sin and disobedience, but they were taken to their promised land, and later brought back to it from exile and their relationship with God put completely right.

St Paul must be one of the greatest examples of sin forgiven. He held someone's coat at the stoning of St Stephen, he went to Damascus fully intent upon arresting and bringing to justice any and all followers of Jesus he could find in the sure and certain knowledge that they would be put to death if they could be found guilty. Yet without seeking God's forgiveness, without doing anything to put himself right with God, he became a receiver of

the offer of God's grace and he accepted it, despite all the sin he had committed in the past. He renounced his sinful ways not to garner God's favour but because he had already received it.

And this is why Jesus ate and drank with sinners. Not because they were right but because someone needs to reach out to the fallen and guide them back onto their feet. Because sometimes people feel like they have gone too far and they cannot be loved by God, they cannot put right their sins, and they need to hear that the gospel, the good news, is that by the grace of God and through the saving death and resurrection of Jesus we are put right with God, there is not a thing that we do to earn it but when we accept that grace we will respond to it and change will happen in our lives.

Jesus reaches out to sinners, he did so in his incarnate form, and he does so today, not to show them what they must do to be loved but to tell them that they are already loved they simply need to have the faith that God can do what we humans so often fail to do, truly forgive.

Let us pray that we will look on one another with a renewed sense of the forgiveness we have already been shown by God and live lives of generosity and forgiveness in God's image. Amen.