

Refraining from judging others helps to set ourselves free from judgement

Sermon by Andy Wurm, Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, 5th August 2018

When King David reacted angrily and suggested punishment for the rich man who stole the poor man's lamb, as told to him by the prophet Nathan, it was definitely a case of *the pot calling the kettle black*. Nathan made up the story in order to get David to pass judgement upon himself, who, despite having more than he needed, exploited someone who didn't have enough (taking Bathsheba and having her husband killed) and then passed judgement on someone else who acted similarly to himself.

David's sin was breaking the seventh commandment (you shall not commit adultery) but flows from breaking the tenth commandment: you shall not covet your neighbour's wife (or anything that is your neighbour's). The Hebrew actually says 'you shall not *DESIRE* your neighbour's wife or anything else..' It's not desire in an emotional sense, such as sexual attraction, nor is it desiring you had a car like your neighbour's. It means obsessing and acting upon your impulse purely for self-satisfaction. It is competing for what someone else has or what they are, and the beginning of violence against the other. It is so basic to human behaviour that Psalm 51 says its part of our lives from the moment we're born: 'surely in wickedness I was brought to birth: and in sin my mother conceived me'. It means we are born into a world which shapes us and encourages us to desire what others have and coerces us into violence to get it. It's a state we can't get out of by ourselves, traditionally referred to as sin.

We talk a lot about sin in the church, so it's important to be clear about what sin is. Jesus says (in John's Gospel) that the world has a wrong understanding of sin, but the Holy Spirit will teach people about what true sin is. The popular notion of sin is that it is basically what the majority or those in power deem to be sin. That can range from a social sin such as adultery to a peer-group sin such as befriending a person deemed unacceptable to the group, so it includes actions which really hurt others as well as those that simply go against accepted norms of fashion, political correctness, or just the desire to paint others as different. The common factor in anything being considered here is that it involves casting out, excluding, rejecting or even killing, the one labelled sinner. It's a mechanism by which the powerful maintain privilege and respectability, or in the old language *righteousness*.

A few weeks ago, *Weekend Australian Magazine* columnist Bernard Salt wrote an article about a theoretical body he named the *Social Licence Review Board*. He said that its work was closely linked to political correctness and that for something to be allowed, it had to be permitted not by governmental decree, but tribal (or social) agreement. That's fairly close to the popular notion of sin. Social judgement is a good alternative to the word sin, because it involves social groupings judging what is and is not acceptable, and it encourages individuals to judge others and rewards individuals for judging others. This also has the effect of causing individuals to judge themselves in the way someone else in their social group might judge them, and so they create the inner voice of judgement which condemns them from within themselves. One of the descriptions given to the Satan is *the Accusing One*, so the Satan can be thought of as the humanly-created voice which condemns from within, telling the individual they are bad and undermining their self-value. Rather than help to create a person, this voice uncreates or depersonalises. So I hope you can see that the popular idea of what sin is, is actually a mechanism for exclusion, by which people feel better about themselves for not being like those they call sinners. In a religious context, this is given the imprimatur of God, in other words, what those with social power call sin is claimed to be what God sees as sin. That's why those who killed Jesus believed they were acting in accord with God's will. It's why religious terrorists claim to be carrying out God's will.

But you don't need God to justify labelling someone you don't like as a sinner. In fact, these days sometimes to be religious is considered a sin in some circles. But the mechanism at work is just the same as when God is invoked to justify labelling as such.

Jesus says the Holy Spirit teaches the world about the true nature of sin, and the reason for that is the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus, who exposes the popular notion of sin as false and nothing other than the exertion of power by the strong upon the weak. The real sin, as we see in Jesus' crucifixion, is the act of casting out whoever is different, scapegoating, creating a victim out of one who challenges the status quo, the real sin is rivalry. And that is the nature of the world we are born into, where fighting to get ahead of others, rejecting those we disagree with, being violent towards those who hurt us, and so on are considered normal and appropriate, so it is hard to see it for what it really is. That's why it's so easy for us to end up like King David – judging and condemning others, while we are acting in a similar way ourselves. Or the Pharisee in the temple, giving thanks to God that he is not like the tax-collector-sinner, praying nearby.

So, there are two views on sin: one in which the individual sinner is blamed for their deviance, and the other in which sin is a state into which we are born and can hardly escape from by our own efforts. The first is dealt with by punishment – exclusion, rejection or even death. The second is dealt with by forgiveness: we are forgiven for allowing ourselves to be caught up and driven by what is mostly beyond our control. Yes, we are responsible for it, but in a way, it's not our fault. The first view of sin sees it as like breaking rules, the second as like a sickness, needing healing. Another term for healing is being set free or forgiven. That's what Christianity means by forgiveness. Contrary to some of the wording associated with this, forgiveness isn't being let off a crime, but set free from the grip of something.

Confession and absolution then, is not about reminding ourselves that we are bad and constantly failing, but that along with the rest of humanity, we are being rescued or set free from our rivalry with one another. This is a difficult thing to accept, because we are socialised into understanding ourselves as different, and not like, others, who are sinners. We are not like racists, for example. We are not like those narrow-minded religious people, or we are unlike those selfish people who push into queues, or we're not like Donald Trump, or others who we may judge as deviant.

I was intrigued to hear the other day of a political party accused of failing to address claims of sexual abuse within its ranks – a party of which at least one of its politicians was recently condemning the Catholic Church for what he judged to be failure to address sexual abuse properly. I don't say that to be critical, but it just shows how careful we have to be, and that it is much better to judge bad behaviour without casting out or rejecting the organisation or individual. Jesus shows us that we are all caught up in sin, so it's kind of a 'level playing field', where we are all equal.

Jesus asked God to forgive those who were killing him, because they didn't know what they were doing. In other words, they were driven by something they weren't even conscious of. His response to that was compassion, not a desire to punish. That's what the words of absolution mean – that God is compassionate towards us for our sin and acting to rescue us from it.

How hard is it for us to be like that too! To respond to those who sin against us with compassion, rather than retaliation. Something that can help us though, is that to respond with compassion (or forgiveness) also turns off the judgement with which we might otherwise condemn ourselves.