



Sermon

22-8-21

When Faith Turns Toxic

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This was a hard sermon to write. It is not easy or comfortable to look honestly at our history. Much of it is good. Some of it will have us hanging our heads in shame.

For there are three major issues that keep people from believing in the God we worship.

1. That science has shown that God is not necessary.
2. The problem of innocent suffering.
3. When religion becomes toxic. When religious people do bad things.

In my last two sermons I responded to the first two questions. Today I will respond to the third.

The first thing we need to see is that toxic faith is not the special preserve of Christians or even religion in general. I trust that by the end of this sermon that will be obvious.

Equally, however, the world around us is right in calling us to live in accordance with our own standards. Failure in this causes the most horror if not revulsion when power is abused, and moral failure is uncovered. "We thought we could trust you above all people and now we discover that you are no more trustworthy than anyone else." No wonder that the anger is so fierce and the abuse so virulent.

So, we must be brutally honest with ourselves. Each of us knows full well that we do not always (often?) live up to the challenges of our Faith or the demands

of our morality. We must therefore keep in mind the old but true saying that the ***Church is NOT a parade ground for saints. It is a hospital for sinners.***

We all suffer from the ravages of sin. I came to my prayers one morning so angry that when I looked at the liturgy I am currently using I could not say any of the words there. I could only sit mute in the presence of a Saviour who had given His life for me and beg for mercy. I remember a man in my first parish saying to me that he nearly didn't come to receive Communion on Sunday. He had looked back at his behaviour over the past week and felt almost unable to go forward. "But I noticed that you came anyway," I said. "Yes, he replied. I realised that I am NEVER worthy to come but this week it was made obvious to me, so I came knowing this was what taking Communion was all about."

There is a doctrine of our Faith that has got a terrible and misleading name yet describes a terrible truth about us all. It is the doctrine of Total Depravity. What it *sounds* like is that there is nothing good in human beings. We are from top to toe all bad and there is nothing good to appeal to in us.

That is manifestly NOT true. Simply look around you at all the good you see. People everywhere are loving one another, serving one another, doing good and great things for one another and for the world in which we live. There is plenty of good around.

Yes, and there is plenty of evil as well. What the words "total depravity" are saying is that there is not one part of our being that is not contaminated by sin. Now please notice the word "contaminated". Our minds, hearts, wills, are not destroyed, but they are infected and thus inhibited by sin. Listen to St Paul. Romans 7: 21-25. "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 life of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who can rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ my Lord!"

We need to willingly face the reality of the kind of people we are. Only by Grace are we able to sit here this morning and dare to enter the presence of God. Only by the unfathomable cost of the Cross can we dare to come into His presence.

"We do not presume to come to your Holy Table, merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but only by your great mercy. We are not worthy even to gather up the crumbs under your table. But you are the same Lord whose nature is always to have mercy. Grant us, therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the

body of your dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink His blood, that we may evermore dwell in Him and He in us.”

Once we have got these truths fixed in our minds and hearts, we are ready to explore and understand the problem of toxic faith.

In the TV series “The West Wing” one episode came out just after the 9/11 destruction of the Twin Towers. The profits from that episode went to the families of the victims.

The fictional scenario had the White House locked down because of a bomb threat and a group of children are kept there until the all clear signal is given. In response to a question from one of the children about Islamic extremist terrorism one of the staff puts the following on a whiteboard.

Al Kaieda is to Islam what is to Christianity.

Now fill in the blank.

The answer is The Ku Klux Klan.

Now let’s put this another way.

Al Kaieda and the Ku Klux Klan are to religion whatis to Atheism. What goes in the gap?

Auschwitz or the mass murders in Russia or oppression in China.

The common feature of each of these regimes?

They are all a terrible distortion of something good.

Communism aimed to release the poor from the oppression of the rich and powerful. Nazism gained power by promising to address the injustices of the Versailles Treaty. The French Revolution aimed to offer an alternative to the long years of religious wars Europe had suffered. Al Kaieda has seen the moral bankruptcy of the West and the obviously inferior god we worship.

Interestingly, I could not find anything positive in the Ku Klux Klan, unless it is the desire to restore the way of life that the South had before the American Civil war.

But lest you think that members of the scientific community are free from this, listen to this. A Chinese Palaeontologist made some scientific discoveries that raised questions about Evolution and reported his findings at a science conference in America. The lack of any response to his questions prompted him to ask why. He was told that scientists in America don’t like to hear evolution

criticised. To which he replied, "I now know the difference between America and China. In China we can criticize Darwin and not the Government. In America you can criticise the Government and not Darwin."

An eminent scientist and Nobel prize winner said in a public lecture at Oxford, "You must not question Evolution."

Here is emotional oppression that has in one form, or another cost many young students their Faith.

Please notice two things. 1. The centre of morality is love. Jesus takes it further for Christians, and commands us to love your enemy. How is it possible that we can persecute let alone kill in God's name? The centre of Christian leadership is service. How is it possible that that this sacred trust can be abused?

2. The centre of science is to question and explore allowing only the evidence to determine how far we go. How can it be possible for a scientist to say, "You must not question evolution."? Yet that is what happens.

No matter where we look, we see humankind acting in a way contrary to their most deeply held morals or central beliefs.

We have no reason for pride as Christians. Our history is littered with stories of Christians aiming to do good things but using terrible means to achieve them. When the stories are true, (and not all of them are) we need to be honest and say to all who would tell us our faults, "You are right, and I ask your forgiveness for our hypocrisy."

Our ancestors let us down. There is no excuse. Many times, they were not even aware of their sin.

But what will future generations say of us? We have no reason for pride.

A group I attended was studying the 1662 Communion service in the book of Common Prayer. One of the women there said that sometimes she thought that the General Confession was a bit over the top. But then there came a time when she was faced with something she had done for which she was thoroughly ashamed. The old words gave voice to her shame.

Listen to them again.

Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, maker of all things, Judge of all men (In 1662 that meant all people!); we acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, which we from time to time, most grievously have committed, by thought, word, and deed, against thy Divine Majesty, provoking

most justly thy wrath and indignation against us. We do earnestly repent and are heartily sorry for these our misdoings; the remembrance of them is grievous unto us; the burden of them is intolerable. Have mercy on us, have mercy on us, most merciful Father; For thy Son our Lord Jesus Christ's sake, forgive us all that is past; and grant that we may ever hereafter serve and please thee in newness of life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Those words may well give voice to our shame as we listen to some of our history. Such is the depth of sin in our past, only a prayer like that can do justice to the reality of the damage we and our ancestors in the Faith have done.

Equally so, we serve a God who has described Himself as "slow to anger and of great mercy." His grace has been extended to us, so we must extend the same grace to others whose actions and silences have caused so much embarrassment if not horror.

For those looking on from outside the only answer we can give is to be devastatingly honest. There is no need to try to defend their actions. Some of them are indefensible.

There are at least three things we can do.

1. We can say as clearly as possible that those actions, those words, that failure to act, is not in accord with the Faith we have in Jesus Christ. We ask forgiveness for our brothers and sisters in the faith.

2. We need to be constantly reminded of the Parable of the wheat and the Weeds. (Matthew 13: 24- 30) The Church has in its midst some who are not there as followers of Jesus. Not all will follow the teachings of the Lord. Some will even oppose them. Jesus warns us not to try and make a perfect Church. Exercise discipline with mercy (Matt 18: 15-20) but remember the ultimate Judge is Jesus.

3. And if we remember that we are in a hospital for sinners rather than attending a parade ground for saints we will be pointing in the right direction.