

## *A little word with a big meaning!*

*Sunday Readings: Acts 4:32-35; 1 John 1:1—2:2; John 20:19-31*

One important little word occurs 13 times in our Readings and special prayers for this Second Sunday of Easter. It's also a word that we hear quite often in our services each week... It's a tiny word, but it has had an enormous impact on the life of the church and on Christians down the centuries. Any ideas what that word might be? **Sin!**

Now this is a hugely difficult word – and it's been bandied around in Christian teaching so frequently that, sadly, it's a word that has come to be associated with what the church is all about. For all its difficulties, however, speaking about SIN is clearly necessary if we are to understand our Christian faith – particularly because, as today's Collect reminds us, God gave his only Son “to die for our sins.” If that's true, we need to take it seriously and see what relevance it has for our Christian lives.

As we think about sin and its consequences our mind might go to the Ten Commandments. That's God's Law – and surely breaking God's Law is what sin is. The complication is that there are 613 Laws in the Old Testament – and God expects his people to obey ALL of them. If breaking God's Law is SIN, then there's quite a lot of opportunity to SIN...

At the time of Jesus there were groups of religious teachers and leaders who made this their particular business. The Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law tried to make sure that everyone in Israel lived a holy life in accordance with God's Law. They had a thorough knowledge of all 613 Laws, and to try and make sure no one came near to breaking them (and therefore ‘sinning’) they built what we can think of as a ‘hedge’ around the law. If you broke through the ‘hedge’, that was dangerous – but hopefully the hedge stopped you going any further so that at least you didn't break the holy Law of God.

This became the cause of the great disagreements between the Pharisees and Jesus. He never questioned their keeping of the Law – it was impeccable – but it wasn't enough, and he was constantly at odds with these self-righteous people. This major misunderstanding between them meant the Pharisees could not tolerate Jesus and eventually he had to be silenced. Clearly, for Jesus, there was something that God required beyond merely keeping the Law.

We'll need to come back to what this misunderstanding was all about – but before that we jump ahead to the centuries following the death and resurrection of Jesus, to the established life of the Church. What we see is that, all too easily, the church gets into the same thought pattern as the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law and begins to develop a system that is built on keeping the Law. The Christian faith comes to be seen as a moral code – with the result that the church is thought always to be on about sin – and being a Christian is imagined to be about morality and keeping the Law (making way for the oft heard refrain of those who find no place for the Church in their lives : “I'm just as good as those who go to Church...”)

Jesus would have no truck with this and consistently demonstrated that his concern was for something far more life-changing than merely keeping the law. It wasn't that Jesus didn't think morality was important – he argued for a far more vigorous and demanding keeping of the Law. But keeping the law – however perfectly – did not mean a person was free from sin. On the contrary, a rigid dependence on the Law usually led to being unaware of sinfulness.

Having said all that, what then do we mean by this little word ‘SIN’?

In the First Letter of John we read about walking in the light and walking in darkness. Here we come close to what we mean by SIN. SIN is about **not** walking in the light of God, but rather walking in the darkness. Walking in the light is much more than merely keeping the rules. It's about the heart – a heart that's open to the light and life of God and the particular ways in which God wants to express that light and life in us.

A very good example of this was seen in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles. The first Christians decided that, to express their willingness to allow the light of God to shine through their life as a community, they would hold everything in common and make sure there was not a needy person among them. This is not a new law that we are required to keep – this is an example of God's people having hearts open to what

walking in the light of God meant for them. It was what God was calling them to, and as they responded they found profound blessing.

Another way of putting it would be to say that their life as a community reflected the life of the Kingdom of God, and we know that this was a crucial part of the teaching of Jesus. The life of the Kingdom is frequently like turning the world upside down and inside out. It's a radically different way of seeing the world: it's about being aware of a different light shining, and then responding to that light.

It's precisely what those who opposed Jesus refused to do – and in this they were guilty of SIN. They merely kept the Law, and if anyone broke the Law then, in their eyes, those people were sinners. To them, Jesus was one such person. In the eyes of the Law-keepers Jesus was a sinner – SO great a sinner, he deserved the death penalty. And death by crucifixion.

The death of Jesus on the cross, and then his resurrection, made plain that the Kingdom of God will have the victory – life overcomes death, love overcomes hatred, light overcomes darkness. In the mysterious ways of God's grace, all who have hearts open to the love and light of God seen in Jesus find themselves caught up in this new life and find God's grace and forgiveness. "Jesus died for our sins."

Having spoken about this choosing to walk in the light, St John realises it is very demanding and he wants to give us some words of encouragement

1. In this matter of sin we're not on our own – it's something that affects us all: "If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves." (1 John 1:8) Yes, we're all sinners – and God knows we're sinners: God is not surprised!
2. But "If we confess our sins we will be forgiven." (1 John 1:9) There are no conditions attached to this – God will forgive us because he is "faithful and just".
3. And if we sin again, (which we certainly will!) God does not give up on us, because Jesus is the one who speaks with the Father on our behalf; he's our Advocate. (1 John 2:1f)

The challenge for us, both individually and as a community, is to have hearts that are open to the ways in which God is calling us to walk in the light – to see things differently.

- It will affect the way we relate to other people, and when we fail to have hearts open to others we easily fall into sin.
- It will inform the values that we believe to be important in the political arena and the kind of society we work for. When we do not allow God's light to shine in that part of our lives, we foster a sinful society.
- it will make a difference to the way we go about our work, and when God is not allowed in the workplace sin is soon very evident.
- It will change the way we go about our daily lives and make a difference to the many choices that we have to make... When we start to think God isn't interested in the ordinary things of life and close our hearts to the light of God in the everyday, then we fall into sin.

Yes, we need to take SIN seriously... It was necessary for Jesus to die for our sins. But let us not trivialise sin by seeing it in terms of leading merely moral lives, but rather the result of choosing to walk in darkness rather than in God's light.

Let us take the opportunity to seek God's grace to show us where we too easily find ourselves preferring the darkness, and ask for the desire and courage to have hearts open to God's light and love, and respond to the radical invitation to walk in that light.

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