

As it's a good day to make a confession, I should begin by confessing that I don't always ask my family's permission before including them in my sermons, which is a bit unfair. However, Sarah herself suggested today's illustration, so I'm on safe ground.

She's made use of having some time during half term to clean the oven. This included taking off the inside glass panel from the door - I did that. It turned out to be pretty black - I thought it was meant to be that colour. Sarah got valiantly to work with a scourer, but the grime wasn't really coming off. Then she found something called Oven Pride. You know it? After applying this for the necessary time, she came back, and guess what - the grime came off like a treat and the oven door was soon sparkling. Now you can see all the wonderful things cooking inside.

So, what does that remind us about, on this Ash Wednesday? Well, if you think of the grime on the door as being our sinfulness, that it reminds us that it matters. Like the dirty door, sin has a way of sticking to us in increasing layers, so that we lose sight of God's light shining inside - and so do other people. After a while we begin to think that this is just how we are.

I think it's better not to think of sins as if they are individual actions. It's more to do with our attitudes and habits, our way of being, our sinfulness - what makes us

less loving - less open to giving and receiving love. The way of being that closes us off from each other and from God - and from our true selves. This attitude then comes out in different ways. It may lead to being defensive or aggressive - the odd comment or piece of gossip. It may mean avoiding what we are called to do and be and finding comfort instead in short cuts to happiness - wanting things, seeking shallow pleasures. It may mean closing our eyes to the needs of others, or getting into habits which damage ourselves, or keeping God at a safe distance.

We will all have our own patterns of sinfulness - some we are aware of, and some which we need help to discover. And sinfulness is not just personal - it affects whole cultures and countries - through warping values, twisting the truth, or hardening into anger and hatred. Sinfulness causes hurt and misery to us, to other people, and on the wider scale, to whole countries.

And even beginning to think about our sinfulness isn't easy - it's a bit like cleaning the oven door - it's not something that most of us really want to do. And that's probably because we think that if we really look at our own sinfulness, we will be defeated by it. We will never be able to get rid of this negative and harmful way of thinking and acting and being which as the bible says 'clings so closely to us'.

But the miracle of Oven Pride reminds us that we don't have to deal with this stuff on our own! Look at the scene in our gospel reading. How does Jesus look at the woman who has been caught in adultery? He looks at her truthfully - he knows fully who she is and what she has done. But he also looks at her lovingly. He doesn't want to condemn her - he wants to set us free.

And that's how Jesus is with us. He looks at us truthfully, as we really are. And that is vitally important, because it means that he also loves us **as we are**. Whenever we come to say our prayer of confession in a service, we remember that God is 'gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love'. But often we have not really had any time to think about the things God is forgiving us for. So we are left with an unacknowledged sense that if God really knew us, he wouldn't forgive us. We let him clean the outside of the oven door, as it were, the bit we admit to - but we leave ourselves with the problem of the stuff on the inside.

That's where this service is so good. Here we spend a little more time really acknowledging our sinfulness - like the writer of Psalm 51, pleading with God to wash us from our sins and give us a new start, and a new heart. And we can then carry on with this more penitential attitude during

Lent, allowing ourselves to be more reflective and more aware of our sinfulness.

And that's why it's good to have Lent as a season of challenge. We challenge ourselves to walk with God a little more closely. We challenge ourselves to give up some of the short cuts to comfort - be they cake or beer or something else. We challenge ourselves to follow a discipline of prayer or reading, or to live more simply or more lovingly. And we will probably fail at some point. That is partly the point. Because then we are reminding ourselves of our inbuilt weakness.

And at the same time we remember that Jesus sees us as we are, and he still looks on us with love. Like the woman in the story, he doesn't want to condemn us - he wants to set us free. And like the miracle of Oven Pride, when we are open about our sinfulness with God, when we admit to him how we really are, then his grace can get to work making us clean - giving us a new start - removing the layers of guilt and allowing his love to shine through.

Whenever we return to God with all our heart we find him waiting with open arms, knowing our shame and our hurt, offering us healing and forgiveness, gently setting us back on our way with the promise that he will be with us.

So, I've put the nice clean inside oven door back in. Will it get dirty again? Yes. But maybe we will notice a little more when it does. Maybe we will keep it a little cleaner. Maybe we will even spot what sort of cooking causes the most mess, and change the way we do things.

And maybe that can happen for us too, when we open ourselves up before God. It isn't easy - we don't like making ourselves vulnerable and admitting the deep flaws in our makeup. But allowing God to get to work on our sinfulness, with the gentle but powerful cleaning action of his grace, is a great relief. It can be a great source of joy and freedom too. We don't have to pretend any more. We don't have to be frightened that someone will find out - that if God knew us as we really are he wouldn't like us.

Because he does know us. He loves us and accepts us just as we are. He delights when we turn back to him and say we can't do it on our own - when we ask for his help. And he can help us to gradually learn a better way to live.

It's good that there are times like this when we stop and really face our sinfulness and admit our need for grace and forgiveness. And as we discover that God really is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, then we may feel more able to go on returning to him with all our heart all through the year, and discovering the limitless love which Jesus showed us, the

love of a Father who delights in us and wants to set us free.