

# *A Faith to Live By...*

## *Sermons on the Apostles' Creed*

### 11. "The forgiveness of sins..."

Last week we were thinking about the clause in the creed that has to do with the church – what the creed refers to as the ‘communion of saints’. The

communion of saints! Take just a moment on a Sunday morning to look around you, and another moment to look inside you, and I think you’ll quickly begin to question what that phrase means, or whether we are meant to say it with our tongue so firmly lodged in our cheek that we can only mumble.

Well, the creed was put together thoughtfully, and the clause we are looking at this morning comes quickly to our aid. The church, it reminds us, is very much a *fellowship of sinners* too, and its focus from first to last is upon the forgiveness of sins. Not the sins of others, but its own sins, *our* own sins. And not sins lurking in some dark and murky past which have now successfully been overthrown and banished; but sins which continually beset us, which harry us and trouble us and leave us (in our most acute moments of self-awareness) feeling bad about ourselves and what we amount to in moral and spiritual terms.

So, that the church is the ‘communion of saints’ cannot and does not mean that we are, in our gathering here, a phalanx of righteousness, goodness and holiness. Which is frankly a huge relief! Because if that were so, if moral scrupulousness and accomplishment were a condition of being here, I would be the first to be asked by God to leave the building quietly and without a fuss; and the reality is, of course, that the rest of you would be forming a queue behind me.



But that's not what 'communion of saints' means at all. We aren't the communion of those who have attained sanctity, holiness, a clean bill of moral health. On the contrary, as the Book of Common Prayer puts it beautifully, where sanctity is concerned, 'there is no health in us'. What the church *is*, rather, is the community of those who have been forgiven. Or, better, the community of those who *know* that they have been forgiven, and whose song is one of joy and gratitude in that fact. Because God's forgiveness is offered freely to all; but in order to become a reality forgiveness needs not just to be offered, but to be accepted, responded to, and handed on to others. The church, we might say, is meant to be the place in God's world which is marked above all by *forgiveness* – the state of having your life changed by receiving the forgiveness of God.



The sixteenth century Reformer Martin Luther speaks of Christians as those peculiar people who are *simul iustus et peccator* – 'righteous and sinful at the same time'. We are righteous because God has united us to his Son, Jesus, the only human being in whose life true holiness, true goodness, true righteousness was the motive force and the characteristic of a human life from birth to death. But because we are *united* to him, because he took *our* humanity and made it his own, what is his belongs to us too. So, God declares us to be righteous, even though *in ourselves* we know ourselves to be still very much entangled in sin, and still very much in need of forgiveness, not just as a once for all donation, but as a daily, hourly reality at work in our lives.

That we are forgiven sinners is something that Christians have in common with everyone. What sets us apart, though, is that we are a fellowship of forgiven sinners who manifest *forgiveness* – those who know and rejoice in the fact that we have been forgiven for our alienated past, and who are constantly finding themselves in fresh need of God's forgiveness, as sin manages to wheedle its way into our lives again and again. So, the forgiveness of sins to which the creed refers is not some abstraction that we believe in theoretically, as though it were some moral adjustment

transacted over our heads long, long ago. God's forgiveness is indeed rooted in the eternal character of God and the reality of what God did once for all in Christ; but it is and must be too a dynamic reality, as real in our day to day living as the air that we breathe – to be sought and received again, and again, and again. And it is in and through that constant breathing in and out, expelling sin in our confession of it, and inhaling God's forgiveness which is always there waiting for us, that the righteousness of Christ which already belongs to us is gradually infused into our lives – one sin at a time, one area of our messy, inadequate, damaged lives at a time.

How aware are we of the sins that beset us? What are the things in our inner lives, or in our dealings with others, that we know aren't fit to be offered to God, that threaten to drag us back to our past, unredeemed,



ungodly state? What are the habits of mind, imagination and body that our better part longs to be free of, but which continue to assault us, continue to win victories in our lives – whether they are on a large scale or a small scale? And as we find ourselves thinking them, imagining them, doing them again, capitulating to them yet again when we had promised ourselves that next time we would better them, refuse their seductive approach, wrestle successfully with their compulsive draw, our failure so easily leaves us feeling an odd mixture of guilt and shame and anger, knowing that we aren't up to it and suspecting that we never will be.

But genuine Christian faith knows all about that experience because it is the shadow side of the joy of the gospel! In fact, if that is *our* experience, then paradoxically we can and should take heart and take encouragement from it. Because, as Jesus tells the disciples in chapter 16 of John's Gospel, it is the Holy Spirit who 'convicts us of sin', who draws our attention to sin and shows it up decked out in its true colours. And in Romans chapter 7 the apostle Paul speaks of precisely this sort of struggle: the things that I desire to do, he tells his readers, are the things that I repeatedly fail to do, doing instead the very things that I long to be free from. We want above all

things to be Christlike, but we discover that there is something in us that is at war with that desire and seems constantly to have the upper hand. But what that means, he goes on, is that *God is at work* through the Holy Spirit bearing witness to the law –



to God's own character and the sort of behavior that will glorify and hallow God's name – in our inner being. And when that work begins, when it gets serious, then it can *only* result in our inner life becoming a battlefield, a perpetual scene of conflict between what our old, sinful self dictates, and what the Spirit leads the new 'me' and the new 'you' to desire to be and to do. And sometimes we succeed, and sometimes we fail horribly. But that the struggle is there at all, that the desire to allow Christ's life to flood the whole of our own lives and to purge them of sin is there is itself a clear indication that God is at work in us – even though that work still has a long way to go. You see, were the Spirit *not* present and active in us, there would *be* no struggle, no conflict. We should simply follow without qualm the dictates of what Paul calls 'the flesh' (which doesn't just mean lust, greed, and other obvious colourful excesses, but whatever our old, unregenerate humanity tends naturally towards that is unacceptable to God). As the old joke goes:

"I don't have a problem with sin."

"Really?"

"Nope. I get tempted, and I sin. No problem!!"

*Ta dah!* But it's no joke, especially for Christians.

Because if sin is *not* something we struggle with then we have either already arrived at perfection (which, quite frankly, is the less likely scenario!) or else we are not conscious of the work of God's Spirit in our day to day lives, which is a cause for serious spiritual concern. Most of us, though, will be aware of the struggle at some level, even if only in a blunted, less than acute way.



It's one of the great ironies of the life of faith that sin shows up far more clearly on the radar of those who are farthest along the way, those who are *most* Christlike, those who are most 'saintly' in the more familiar way that that term is commonly used. And there *are* folk like that. They aren't many in number – but many of us will probably have stumbled across individual Christians (and they will typically have been Christians for many years) who, while certainly far from perfect, nonetheless exude Christ in a way that most of us don't and in this life probably never will. And yet such individuals, when we meet them, don't seem to have any awareness of this aura of sanctity that they exude. If anything, it is a sense of their own *sinfulness* and moral and spiritual inadequacy and failings that seems to haunt them.

Why is that? I think it's because as the Spirit of Christ advances, the forces which oppose its work become ever more aggressive and resort to ever more ingenious strategies. In most of us the resistance to their operation is less significant, and in broad swathes of the populace it is more or less non-existent. And, at the same time, as the Spirit succeeds in conforming us ever more completely to the shape and substance of Jesus' own way of being human, so we become ever more sharply sensitized (as we saw in a previous study Jesus himself was sensitized) to the unbearable reality of sin present in the world around us and, in our case, in



ourselves. So, it is precisely the holiest, the most 'saintly' individuals who are most likely to be found anguishing about the shards of sin which remain and continue to disfigure and distort their souls, even though, to the rest of us, these may seem relatively slight and trivial.

For us, as for them, though, the answer is not to collapse into self-doubt and spiritual anxiety. It is precisely to pick ourselves up, dust ourselves down, rejoice that the struggle is indeed a struggle – an indisputable sign that God's Spirit is at work waging war with sin in us – and to return once again to our knees to *confess* our sins, knowing that God has already forgiven us before we ask, but knowing too that the healing and redemptive power of *receiving*



forgiveness for *this* sin, and *this* instance of it is what opens us up more fully and completely to the work of the Holy Spirit, and so prepares us to return to the fray – not *discouraged*, but *encouraged* in our faith. One sin at a time.

To ‘*believe* in the forgiveness of sins’, then, is to live by this perpetual dynamic, a matter more of the heart and the will than the head. And it begins in the very moment that we turn consciously to God and let go – inviting him, allowing him, longing for him to do what we know we cannot do; and bracing ourselves for the turmoil which is bound to follow.

Scripture approaches the reality of our relationship with God by picturing our need and God’s gracious provision for it in a variety of different ways. Sometimes it pictures our need in terms of dirt which stains or pollutes our lives and renders them unfit to be in God’s presence, and which God graciously cleanses and purifies us from. Sometimes the picture is that of having accrued a massive debt which we have no resources to pay, and God is pictured as the one who gladly pays or cancels our debt, setting us free from its burden and its consequences. Elsewhere God is likened to someone who rescues us from a dire fate (the root of our more generic term ‘salvation’), or as a



physician who heals us from disfiguring and ultimately fatal disease, or as a hero who fights and wins a battle with evil, delivering us from its tyranny. Sometimes the picture is that of a law court where we are on trial, knowing ourselves to be guilty, but God declares us to be righteous, freeing us from the penalty or consequences of our guilt. The array of images is rich and complex, and if we want to reflect on the reality of God’s redemptive action then we need to reckon with all of them, because each of them has something important to tell us, and no single one tells it simply ‘as it is’. In the creed, though, we have to make do with a highly compressed version of things, and ‘the

forgiveness of sins' stands in for all of these other ways of picturing sin and redemption. It can do so because it refers us straight to one of the most prominent and central of these images – of our personal *reconciliation* to God, initiated by God's forgiveness of us. 'We love because *God loved us first...*' as our liturgy reminds us week in and week out.

God, Scripture encourages us to suppose, is in all sorts of ways wholly unlike us, but it nonetheless offers us images with which to work in picturing and making sense of our relationship to God. And central among those is its picturing God not in impersonal but *personal* terms – i.e. encouraging us to think of our relationship with God as analogous to our relationship with other persons, *someone* rather than something, and someone to whom we are closely related (whether we realize it or not) and with whom, therefore, we can enjoy a relationship in which we listen and speak, act and are acted upon in turn. And someone who loves us and is thus *affected* by our responses and by the things that happens to us rather than indifferent to them.

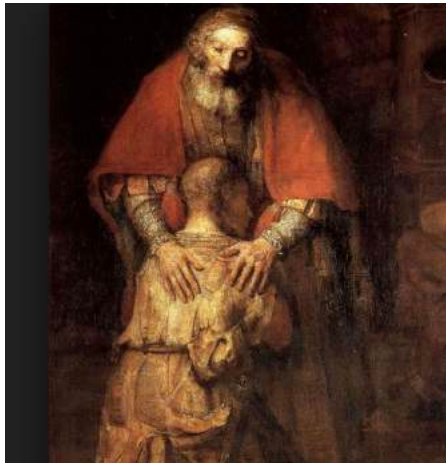
This is the context in which the image of reconciliation and forgiveness arises. God, we are encouraged to suppose, is like a parent or a close friend who has been deeply aggrieved, hurt and angered by our behavior towards him. Our actions and attitudes have been so outrageous that they have broken the relationship we once had and were always intended to enjoy with God. Of course, they can't sever this particular relationship completely. We may try to cut ourselves off from the one who is our creator and sustainer but were we to succeed we should quickly disappear in a puff of smoke! So, the fact that we are still here at all tells us that, despite our scandalous and hurtful behavior, our attempts to be rid of God and make do without him, God



continues to hold us, to love us, to bear the hurt of our desire to escape him. But the relationship is breached if not dissolved, and like all relationships, it cannot be

healed or restored by one party alone. It takes movement from both sides, willingness on the part of both parties for that restoration to occur.

That, Scripture suggests, is how things stand between us and God. Like a surly adolescent we have not only turned our backs on God and exercised the liberty of the pubescent to scorn him and all that he stands for; in doing so we have involved ourselves in a range of colourful and imaginative things that he cannot abide and which he knows are finally bound to be our ruin unless and until we come to our senses. And God is angered by that, as any loving parent would be; but, like the father in Jesus' parable about the wayward younger son in Luke 15, God's anger is precisely the anger which is the form *love* takes when confronted by what is wrong, and its desire and its purpose is, to cite the Book of Common Prayer again, 'not the



death of a sinner, but rather than he may turn from his sin and live'. And so, like the father in Jesus' parable, the starting point of the healing of the relationship is not the son's remorse-laden pleadings and self-concerned offering of contrition. In the story, the son doesn't even get to utter these carefully prepared attempts to buy back his father's goodwill. He is interrupted rudely by the ungainly spectacle of the father running out to meet him and

showering him with love and tears and joy, all occasioned by the fact that the wayward son has relented, and returned, and is willing to work at being his son again. The restoration begins with the father, who never stops loving, never stops hoping, never stops desiring the reconciliation between them. And so it is, Scripture insists, with us and God. The verb *reconciliation* crops us plentifully in the New Testament, being a particular favourite of the apostle Paul. But its object is *never* God, but *always* the sinner – the alienated son or daughter. In other words, we do not reconcile God to ourselves; it is God who reconciles *us* to *himself*. And this is a reconciliation that begins with God's forgiveness, and his seeking out of those who are the objects of his love, sweeping aside all attempts on our part to win back his affection. We cannot do so, because there is *no need* to do so. God's love for us, even



when it takes the form of righteous and holy anger, is the starting point in all our dealings with him, and he always desires our reconciliation to himself, our restoration to the status of sons and daughters, our good.

That this is so powerful an image for us is perhaps because we know from experience just how difficult, complex and serious a business restoring personal relationships can be. Forgiveness is never easy, especially when the stakes are set high and the breaking of relationships is at



stake. It's one of the ironies of the circumstance that true forgiveness is painful to offer and painful to receive, and that it cannot be bought or earned. It's not a transaction in which both parties are 'satisfied'. That wouldn't be forgiveness at all. True forgiveness is an initiative of wounded love to restore a relationship despite the pain that has been caused, and to refuse to allow the continuing hurt to determine or define that relationship in future. It is messy and demanding, and of course it can only flourish where someone is willing to be forgiven. This, too, is painful, because it means owning and acknowledging the wrong done and taking responsibility for it, coming to terms with the wrong we have done and the pain we have caused. To do this is certainly not 'earning' or coming to 'deserve' forgiveness. Forgiveness can



BUT I'M LOOKING DOWN ON YOU IN A SUPPORTIVE WAY.

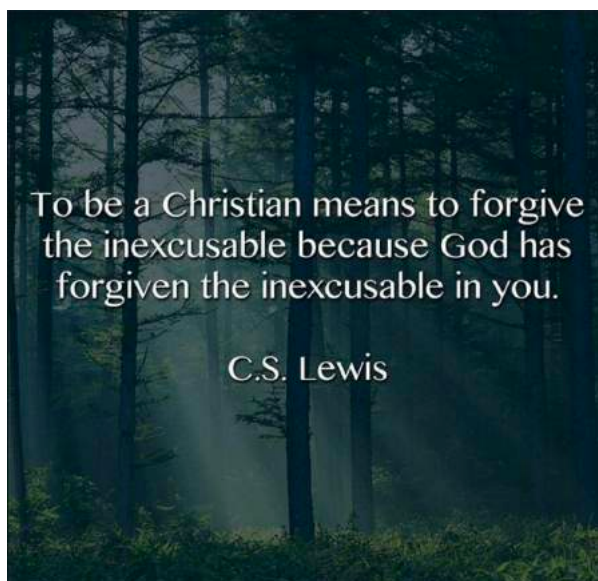
never be 'deserved', otherwise it would not be required in the first place. Nor, of course, can forgiveness ever be offered grudgingly, or dangled over someone's head subsequently in order to reinforce their occupation of some putative moral low-ground. Such self-righteous 'martyrdom' has nothing to do with genuine forgiveness at all. But forgiveness *is* a matter of facing moral and spiritual realities, recognizing our place in the midst of that reality, and sharing in the desire

that the relationship continue despite the abiding presence of some unsightly scar material.

And, both for the forgiver and the forgiven, this can bring remarkable healing. To have wronged someone and to know it, and to have no opportunity to address that and restore the relationship is a painful situation, and one that can bring in its wake a disfigured and diseased soul. We may not name them to ourselves or even acknowledge their existence, but guilt and shame (no matter how deeply buried) will have an impact on us. To have wronged someone and to know it, and to be given the opportunity to own and acknowledge that wrong and to be forgiven for it is a redemptive experience even in our human relationships. It doesn't belittle or trivialize the wrong done; but it refuses to permit that wrong to close down the relationship, or to determine or define who we are. Instead it grants us the opportunity to deal with it in an appropriate manner, and then to move beyond it, each party in the relationship bearing the peculiar pain which wrongdoing generates.

On the human level forgiveness is so messy and so complicated because in reality there is rarely a circumstance in which *all* the rights are on one side alone and all the wrongs on the other. But we should not be fooled by this fact into refusing to acknowledge significant shades of grey, and where and to the extent that forgiveness is genuinely needed and offered there will generally be an identifiable victim and an identifiable perpetrator.

Perhaps the final thing we should remind ourselves of is the fact that Scripture repeatedly links the fact of our forgiveness by God to the imperative that we must forgive one another. 'Freely you have received', says Jesus, 'now, freely give'. And



again, in the Lord's Prayer we enjoin God to 'forgive us our sins *as we forgive* those who sin against us'. Perhaps this takes us back to where we began, and the suggestion that the church is the place in which forgiven-ness is manifest. Because forgiving others, being willing to bear the cost and hurt which forgiving others involves (and we don't get to choose who those others will be!) is not a condition of God's forgiveness of us, but a natural outflowing of its work in our lives. Not to desire to be the sort of people who are willing to forgive others (even if we aren't sure that we can manage it) is not to desire that *forgiven-ness* in which receiving God's forgiveness of us consists. And the transforming work of God's forgiveness in our lives, as the Holy Spirit makes us ever more capable of forgiving, makes the church the community in which God's character is borne witness to not just in word, but in practice.



