

Grosvenor Chapel Sermon Series: “Unpacking the Divine Liturgy”
Sermon 2: “Why do we say sorry every time?”

The Revd Dr Alan Piggot, Assistant Priest, The Grosvenor Chapel
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From the Liturgy

All say: *Almighty God, our heavenly Father,*
 we have sinned against you
 and against our neighbour
 in thought and word and deed,
 through negligence, through weakness,
 through our own deliberate fault.
 We are truly sorry
 and repent of all our sins.
 For the sake of your son Jesus Christ,
 who died for us,
 forgive us all that is past
 and grant that we may serve you in newness of life
 to the glory of your name.
 Amen.

I don't know if you have felt – as I have many times – strangely drawn to church; softened by the atmosphere; seated visibly or invisibly as suits you; borne aloft in spirit by the visuals and the music; acknowledging the presence of God *in the name of the Father; and of the Son; and of the Holy Spirit*; pleased to be greeted with *The Lord be with you*; expectant as the priest introduces the theme of the reading; enthralled, perhaps, if it's a theme as lofty as today's – and then suddenly, like a train slamming on the brakes as she's getting up steam, there's a grating, jarring, screeching mention of sin and repentance and sorrow, and we're on our knees, in brace position: *Almighty God, our heavenly Father, we have sinned against you and against our neighbour*, casting around in our minds for various misdeeds that substantiate this claim. Only with the priest's most

gracious absolution do we jump up in relieved response to the opening of the *Gloria*, and enjoy its rendition by the choir.

For such a short hiatus, introduced so early in the service, the confession seems awkwardly disturbing. Why do we do it, week on week? Why do we say sorry every time?

When you're not actually focused on the sins you're meant to recall, and you feel have to itemise them in your mind in short order, this experience can be especially challenging. I remember agonising before I made my first face-to-face confession with a priest, wondering what I was meant to tell him, before being re-assured by an Irish Catholic acquaintance with long experience in the business: "Oh, just the usual things – I had impure thoughts; I was angry with my friend; I went heavy on the Guinness." And that was meant to be after some attempt at self-examination! How much worse when you're put on the spot at the beginning of a church service! The plain fact is that many of us may not have the dark underside of our lives uppermost in our minds at any moment in time, either because we don't want to explore it, or because it just doesn't seem to present itself to us in a particularly troubling way. And to try and force would be a false move.

But for others here, I am aware that the words I have spoken just now will sound flippant, if not downright offensive. There are those struggling with the enormity of a darkness that seems to intrude on their thoughts all the time, for whom coming through this door will have been an effort, and for whom – once here – everything that's said and done will have overmastering reference to an inner turmoil. I, too, have felt – many times – horribly drawn to church for these very reasons, unable to escape the sense that the whole service – not just one formally designated part of it – involves the recycling of evil or hurt. At times like these, there is no need to force the recollection of sin: it's there in the forefront of the mind, and it doesn't go away when the choir begins to sing.

How much do we really know of those around us when we come to worship? *The light shines in the darkness*¹, but there is here no window on

¹ John 1.5. From the Gospel reading appointed for the day (Second Sunday before Lent).

men's souls. We come here in with our differences and in our isolation, only half aware of what's going on, incapable of relating to some, blind to the feelings of others. This is what sin is: this apartness; this distancing of ourselves from one another and from God; this entrapment in the prison of our souls. This egoism that prevents us from sharing and opening up, from understanding where the other's come from, from understanding how we hurt ourselves in what we do, from bothering about the harm we inflict, as if the victims of our actions didn't count.

We talk about Grenfell. What a world of indifference and isolation was opened up there – lives we never knew about and never really cared about, living – quite literally – in another world. *Through negligence.* We fret about our Lenten discipline – what we might give up – and miss giving up our selfishness; the things that make *us* comfortable; that set us apart from the crowd, in our own eyes. *Through weakness.* We listen to scripture – wantonly; selectively; self-justifyingly; to make it serve our own ends. We become as one with the Prodigal Son of the parable², who – though *he's* done the evil – speaks as if he's the victim instead. Isolated, working alone in a pigsty, far from the comforts of home, it is his own bad choices that have brought him to a sorry pass. *Through our own deliberate fault.* But at least the self-pitying Prodigal uses his isolation as a spur to repentance, to break out of the prison of sin. He resolves: “I will arise and go to my Father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.’”³ He makes the confession of what's brought him to that point. *Through negligence. Through weakness. Through our own deliberate fault.*

Sometimes – just sometimes – it doesn't matter who's the perpetrator and who's the victim. What matters is acknowledgement of the deadliness of sin. Only Jesus Christ is, as we believe, absolutely sinless. And ironically, it's only an absolutely sinless person who can fully feel for the sins of others. Once you begin to sin, your senses are blunted, and you're trapped in a spiral of self-justification. As priest and as victim, Jesus Christ is the only one of us who can get us out of this mess; understanding

² Luke 15.11 – 21.

³ Luke 15. 18.

us more fully than we ever can ourselves; opening us up, one to another; dealing with the sin that entraps and divides us; reconciling, and opening us up, to God.

That is what this eucharist, and all our eucharists, are really about: an approach to God, in Jesus Christ, involving reconciliation and coming together. As an approach, it does involve movement. As an approach, it does involve change. We start from a place where we are in our own little worlds, comfortable or uncomfortable as the case may be. We move towards God in the service, through hearing His Word, and we move towards one another, as through the service we are formed as the Body of Christ. God's very world is opened up to us, as we are restored to our place in God's world. The culmination is when we receive the Body of Christ and we are really in his presence – at one with him, at one with each other, and restored to our place in God's world.

Just before receiving communion we get a reminder that there's one final hurdle to clear. It is the point where the priest says

*Jesus is the Lamb of God
Who takes away the sin of the world.
Blessed are those who are called to his supper.*

and all respond

*Lord, I am not worthy to receive you,
but only say the word, and I shall be healed.*

Here is a recognition that a word must be spoken by Christ, the healer of souls – a word that befits the Word made flesh, who makes everything the way it should be. For that gracious conversation be consummated in our final approach to the altar, there needs to have been a beginning of it, which is why – at the start of the service – we summon forth our voices to spit it out:

*We have sinned against you
and against our neighbour
in thought and word and deed.*

Yes, we say it in unison, and, no, we don't go into details, making all the more poignant the deep hurt and divisions to which the words allude.

And if it sounds stupid, forced, and lacking in real appreciation of what's going on for the people around us, perhaps it's because it is. Perhaps, too, that's the very point of it. At least we've said what has to be said. For although we may confess our sins in the solitude of our hearts, or before one or two trusted others, here we confess them when, as the old Prayer Book puts it, *we assemble and meet together to render thanks for the great benefits that we have received at his hands.*⁴ It verges on insanity to entrust this responsibility to a miscellaneous assortment of individuals who may not know or empathise with each other and for whom, individually considered, the words may ring hollow or trite. "Yet the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men"⁵, and God in His wisdom makes a start with us in the place where we actually are, and as the silly creatures who've done what we've done. The Prayer Book simile is consolingly familiar and brutally apt: *we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep.*⁶

What can this brutish, dumb little flock of us, gathered together for worship on Sunday morning, really say – except, perhaps, something like;

*Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
Forgive our foolish ways!
Reclothe us in our rightful mind,
In purer lives thy service find,
In deeper reverence praise.*⁷

Something like that is why we do it. Describing the actual state of us: telling it as it really is. That's why we say sorry – every time. Amen.

⁴ Book of Common Prayer (BCP) Invitation to the general Confession, from the Order for Morning and Evening Prayer.

⁵ I Corinthians 1.25.

⁶ From the BCP general Confession "to be said of the whole Congregation after the Minister, all kneeling."

⁷ New English Hymnal 353, sung as the opening hymn of this morning's Eucharist.