

## Lent 5

*'No one who abides in him sins;  
no one who sins has either seen him or known him.'* 1 John 3 v6

20 3 16

Most merciful God,  
who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ  
delivered and saved the world:  
grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross  
we may triumph in the power of his victory.

My text for today's sermon may be found in the First Letter of John, chapter 3 and verse 6: *'No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him.'*

One of the things I find deeply attractive about Christianity is the notion that I might be clean, washed clean, from the dirt, grime, filth and the unpleasant smell of my sinfulness.

Well, sin is wrong-doing; failing to hit the target, falling short of the mark. Part and parcel of what it means to be human is to have choice and if we can choose, then clearly we can choose wrongly, put ourselves in the wrong – and that, my friends, is wrong-doing, sin.

But, fortunately, we do have the possibility of being forgiven. There's always a chance to say sorry, to express true regret, to recognise where we've failed to do

what we ought to have done and for us to feel genuine sorrow at our failing to be the people we should truly be – that is to say, the people of God, informed by the love of God and expressed in how we love our neighbour as we truly love ourselves.

Thus far, thus good. But the challenge of today's hard text from the First Epistle of John, an epistle which is the subject of this year's Lenten Bible Studies, is the notion that we, as Christians, can be sin-free: that abiding in God, seeing God; knowing God, renders us permanently pure.

Now, sadly, this challenging idea flies in the face of what John has already firmly told us at the start of his Epistle. Just two chapters earlier, some 37 verses earlier, John affirms this simple truth: **'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.'** (1Jn 1 v8/9)

Here is the paradox at the heart of the problem: we can all and do sin and we can all be forgiven. So how best can we resolve the problem of sinfulness with this vision of being sin-free ?

Well, one way in the Early Church was to delay baptism until we were close to death. Baptism is a ritual purification and part of that ritual is to cleanse us of all our sin through the act of washing in water and the presence of the Holy Spirit in us. That's why the Emperor Constantine, who made Christianity the religion of the Roman Empire, waited before being baptised.

Another way is going regularly to confession, especially before receiving the sacraments. This was the norm in the Catholic Church in the old days and I well remember, as a Sixth Former, studying James Joyce's autobiographical novel set in Dublin at the turn of the C20 – 'A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man'. At the end of the third chapter, Stephen Dedalus – the character who embodies the young James Joyce – emerges from the confessional with a light heart and soaring spirit, confident that his sins have been forgiven and that the prospect of hell which has just been so vividly presented to him in a school retreat would not be the fate that awaited him !

A third possibility is that here John is being truly Jewish. The state he may be referring to is the concept of eternal life that the rich young ruler sought when he rushed up to Jesus to ask him what he must do to inherit eternal life. For a righteous Jew, the coming of the Messiah would herald in a new age by restoring a fallen world to one of peace and justice where all would be good and perfect, including us as human beings.

But I guess, for me, the way I can best resolve the paradox, live with this seeming contradiction is to accept that I must, by definition, be imperfect but also to accept the fact that God's love for me, expressed in an act of grace, will restore me to wholeness just as the prodigal son was restored and forgiven when his father came rushing out to hug his lost son to himself while the lad was still penniless on the road home.

So we all may well be sinful now but we all do have the prospect of one day being sinless.

I have spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist*

*St Bartholomew's, Dinard*

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G: Sermons 33 : Lent 5

