


Wales' Recovery Sunday Service

29 October 2023



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Introduction

A warm welcome to our service on Recovery Sunday. Each year on Recovery Sunday we think about those suffering from various dependencies or addictions and we give thanks for those who support and help them in their difficult journeys. Before we hear our first reading, we start with a prayer. Let us pray.

Opening Prayer

Loving God,
in our sufferings and joys,
in our relationships and daily lives,
we ask that your kingdom come.
Open our eyes to your presence,
open our ears to your call,
open our hearts to your love,
open our ways to your will,
open our actions to your compassion,
open our pain to your peace,
and, in doing so, open our world to your hope.
In the name of Jesus,
Amen

First reading: Matthew 22:34-40

34 Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. 35 One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

37 Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

First hymn

Reflection part 1

Some years back, at the beginning of my ministry, I was taking a service at a care home and I read confidently from Matthew's Gospel: 'The greatest commandment is love God with all your heart, your mind, and your soul; and the second is this: Love your neighbour as yourself'. Without warning, an elderly woman at the back of the room suddenly shouted: 'I don't love my neighbour'. I was left speechless. I looked at the care assistants, they looked at me. But the

moment of silence gave the woman the opportunity to add: 'and, listen 'ere vicar, if you knew her, you wouldn't love her either!'

That woman, of course, had stumbled across a timeless truth – it's easier to preach love and compassion than it is to live it out. Those who are struggling with addiction to alcohol, drugs, food, sex, pornography, or gambling know all too well that people can be judgmental. Those in recovery have had people let them down, mess them around, and be rude and hurtful in their speech and actions. Similarly, those of us who care for the afflicted and addicted can often be treated with indifference and ingratitude by those whom we are trying to help. Whatever our experience, Jesus was unequivocally clear – we are called to love the other, however difficult that is, however idealistic that sounds.

The challenge is to step beyond our own individual egos to recognise what we have in common. Most Christians pray "our father" each week, yet our theological emphasis has traditionally been on the "father", rather than on the little word "our". If God is "our" father, that means, whether we like it or not, all of us are God's children and are brothers and sisters to one another. This is at the foundation of radical compassion that should challenge and inspire us on Recovery Sunday.

The phrase 'brothers and sisters' is, in fact, used very often in scripture. Also, the New Testament frequently uses the Greek word 'brothers' (adelphoi) to refer to both men and women, to both brothers and sisters. In later translations, this is often translated "believers" or "disciples" for inclusivity. But this misses something important about the original word and reflects a general move away from the use of "brothers" and "sisters" in Christian circles. Other groups, whether other faiths (such as Islam) or ethnic and racial groups, still regularly use 'brother' and 'sister' when addressing each other. My dad, an ordained minister in the Anglican Church in Wales, continues to use these terms when meeting strangers. It is such a rare thing to hear, though, that, on saying 'Thank you, brother' to one shopkeeper, he was surprised to be asked to which masonic lodge he belonged! Something of the familial side of the human journey is being lost for Christians by the waning of this biblical tradition. To view others as brothers and sisters leads to a recognition of both our intimacy with, and our duty to, each other.

After all, Love of God and love of our neighbour are not separate dimensions of our spiritual lives: they are, in fact, two sides of the same coin. 'We cannot love God unless we love each other, and to love we must know each other', wrote social activist Dorothy Day who stood alongside the addicted on the streets of New York and elsewhere. Interestingly, the word for 'compassion' in the Old Testament is related to the Hebrew term for womb, *rechem*. In other words, our treatment of each other should reflect the love within a family. We should treat others as if they had shared the same womb as we did, as if they were our own flesh and blood, including those whom we don't get along, those with whom we don't agree, those who are ill or injured, immigrants and asylum seekers, the poor, the hungry, the addicted, those of different nationalities and races, those in our prisons, those of different faiths, the unemployed,

the homeless, the helpless, the hopeless. As Desmond Tutu puts it: "In God's family, there are no outsiders. All are insiders. Black and white, rich and poor, gay and straight, Jew and Arab, Palestinian and Israeli, Roman Catholic and Protestant, Serb and Albanian, Hutu and Tutsi, Muslim and Christian, Buddhist and Hindu, Pakistani and Indian – all belong... We are members of one family. We belong... God says, 'All, all are my children'. It is shocking. It is radical".

Second hymn

Second reading: Genesis 3:1-13

1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" 2 The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, 3 but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"

4 "You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. 5 "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

6 When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. 7 Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

8 Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. 9 But the Lord God called to the man, "Where are you?" 10 He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid." 11 And he said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"

12 The man said, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it." 13 Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

Reflection part 2

The doctrine of original sin teaches that the sin of Adam and Eve tainted all subsequent generations. This doctrine is often derided or dismissed by the secular world. While its language and imagery may seem archaic and alien to modern sensibilities (not least the talking snake!), few doctrines have more contemporary relevance. For us to affirm a radical compassion, we need a recognition that all of us, whoever we are, however settled our own lives seem at present, have a bias or tendency towards self-centredness and selfishness that leads to downfall.

Taken in isolation, however, the doctrine of original sin leads to an incomplete and blinkered spirituality. It needs to be regarded alongside a further Christian doctrine. In the very first chapter of Genesis, God looks back at his handiwork, including humankind, and we are told that he “saw that it was very good”. In other words, yes we have a doctrine of original sin, but we also have a doctrine of original righteousness. This crucial doctrine must never be ignored or relegated in importance – it affirms that we are all, each and everyone of us, valuable, unique, irreplaceable, and infinitely loved.

And so, in the context of recovery, as in any other context, we must affirm the spirituality of original sin and original righteousness. For those of us either involved in pastoral care or having family or friends in recovery, the doctrine of original sin is essential as a reminder of our own fallibility and of the fine line between respectability and ruin. If, as Christians, we are courageous enough to face the reality that if we had another’s genes and a similar upbringing, there is a good chance that we would be acting in the same way, then it becomes almost impossible to ignore the cries of the hurt, the addicted, the suffering, the lonely, the alcohol dependent, the anxious, the homeless, the disenfranchised. As the sixteenth-century English reformer John Bradford is purported to have exclaimed when he saw a group of prisoners being led to their execution: “There but for the grace of God, goes John Bradford”.

While the doctrine of original sin reminds us of our own fallibility, the doctrine of original righteousness reminds us of the divine spark in other people, however far down the tunnel of darkness they have fallen. After all, the incarnation of the New Testament leads us to recognise that in responding to the needs of those in the throws of dependency, addiction, or recovery, we are responding to Christ’s own needs. “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me”, asserts Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel. The life of the Christian must be a process of recognizing Christ in the other, and especially the other who is enduring suffering or difficulty.

A spirituality which recognises the Christ in others helps us to offer the hope of new beginnings and transformation. After all, while original sin reminds us that nature and nurture have a huge hold on our lives, original righteousness reminds us that we are not wholly in bondage to those factors. We are not simply complex robots shackled by our backgrounds and our genes. In recognising the unique worth of each and every person, despite their broken and fallible natures, we affirm that none of us are fixed and finished creatures. The resurrection affirms that God’s possibilities are limitless and all of us have the potential for development, growth, and new life. “Behold I make all things new”, asserts the book of Revelation.

And so the spirituality of the compassionate father of the prodigal son is at the heart of the call to be Christian. We often relate to the errant son in that parable, and we sometimes fear that we might be the jealous older brother. But God is calling us to join him as the running father, who loves and welcomes even his most rebellious, abandoned or lost children. We need to model a kingdom where no prodigal son is unwelcome and where there are no undesirables. Jesus did not turn his back on anybody; he welcomed them with open arms in the shape of a cross.

Third Hymn

Prayers

Let us pray
The response to: Loving Lord
Is: Light the path of recovery
Loving Lord
Light the path of recovery

When one of us has lost self-esteem
Loving Lord
Light the path of recovery

When one of us has let others down
Loving Lord
Light the path of recovery

When one of us can't break the cycle
Loving Lord
Light the path of recovery

When one of us doesn't know how we've ended up here
Loving Lord
Light the path of recovery

When one of us has our freedom curtailed
Loving Lord
Light the path of recovery

When one of us is so ashamed that we can't think straight
Loving Lord
Light the path of recovery

When one of us is battling with our will power
Loving Lord
Light the path of recovery

When one of us won't acknowledge that we have a problem
Loving Lord
Light the path of recovery

When one of us thinks there's no way back
Loving Lord
Light the path of recovery

When one of us thinks 'it'll never happen to me'
Loving Lord
Light the path of recovery

And when one of us forgets that you are waiting to lead us from whatever darkness overwhelms us
Loving Lord
Light the path of recovery
Amen

And so we pray the words Jesus taught us:

Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy Name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen.

Fourth hymn

The Blessing

And so may the light of God surround us,
May the love of God embrace us,
May the power of God protect us,
And may the presence of God watch over us;
And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among us and dwell with us always. Amen

Let us go in peace to love and serve the Lord
In the name of Christ. Amen.

Final hymn

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