



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, February 28, 2010

The Second Sunday in Lent

Choral Evensong

at 4pm

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A Sermon by

The Reverend Victor Lee Austin

on

Romans 6:3-14

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SINS AND SIN

Did you notice that when Paul writes to the Romans, he speaks of “the sinful body,” “enslaved to sin,” “freed from sin,” “[Christ] died to sin,” “dead to sin”? What is Paul talking about? What is this thing, sin, that can take over a body and make it “the sinful body”? What is this sin that can enslave, from which there is talk of being set free, this sin to which Christ died?

We can start by noting that the word here is singular and not plural. Paul writes of being a slave to “sin”—not to “sins.” And this, for many of us, is likely to seem odd. When we think of sin, we think of things we shouldn’t do, but do, or of things we should do, but don’t. We think of “things done and left undone.” And it is undeniably true that things done and left undone can be sins. We can lie when we should have told the truth, and we can remain silent when we should have spoken up. Both are sins.

Yet the focus on the plural—sins—will not help us in the long run. For it leads us into unavoidable debates about whether particular things are sins or not. And then, when we see that there can be disagreement about sins, we may throw up our hands and forget trying to understand this whole business about sin.

Take relativism. At some point we become aware that in some cultures a given practice is acceptable, while that same practice somewhere else is taboo. In one place it may be a sin to loan money at interest to members of one’s own tribe, yet elsewhere such a practice might be common. So relativism seems to undermine the notion that sin is anything more than local convention.

Similarly, and even more strongly, take subjectivism, the notion that what is right or wrong is ultimately a matter of personal decision. On this view, sins (if they exist at all) can only be actions (or failures to act) where I go against the ideals that I have chosen for myself. Only I can tell myself that I have sinned, and I sin only when I do something that is a failure to live up to the goals I have chosen for myself. Clearly, on this subjectivist understanding, there can be no such thing as sins which are the same for all human beings.

So if we think of sins in the plural, they seem relative to local convention and products of personal decision—nothing more. Then when the church tells us that we are sinful, it ends up looking irrelevant, if quaint. But let me suggest two reasons why it is not quaint to speak about sin, and thus why the church is not at all irrelevant in what it has to say.

First: it is impossible to be a consistent subjectivist. It seems to me, anyway, that each person has something to which she is committed the violation of which she will insist is a sin—not just a subjective choice, but a real sin, the doing of which is objectively wrong. This is true even for amoralists who take pleasure in wickedness. Alex, the notorious protagonist of *A Clockwork Orange*, strenuously objects when his programmers make him feel nauseous at the sound of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. That's a sin, he says, screaming in protest.

All people, I think, will have something the taking away of which they would assert is a sin. This is a clue that leads to my second point. Take Saint Paul's language seriously. There are not only "sins," but there is sin, in the singular.

What then is sin, if it is not just sins? It is, I would say, a state of being in which we find that all our relationships are distorted, not what they ought to be. We human beings have four dimensions of relationship, and sin has messed up all four. We are related to the physical world as a creature amongst creatures. We are related to other human beings as those with whom we are meant to live as friends. We have something like a relationship to ourselves, the distortion of which we see when we want one thing but do another. And we have a relationship with God. All these relationships—with the environment, with other people, with ourselves, and with God—all these relationships are corrupted by sin.

It is brilliant of Saint Paul to describe this situation as slavery. Slavery is when we can't do what we want to do, can't be free, can't be ourselves. Sin is our taskmaster, our owner. This state of broken relationships in which we have lost our freedom and cannot do what we want or be who we somehow know we were meant to be—this state is a state of bondage. And it goes beyond any particular sins. You might be able to do something about some of your sins. You might, for instance, be able to become a braver person and speak honestly more often. But neither you nor I nor anyone else can do anything about the fundamental problem, which is the sin that underlies all our particular sins. Sin in the singular is not a matter of relativism, neither is it subjective and variable: it is universal and inescapable.

Now that, you might think, is rather bad news. But it's not, and here's why. We would not know that such was our situation, if we did not also know of the way out of it. People who always live in the dark don't know what light is: but we have seen the light, and so we know that we can, really can, be dead to sin. We can be liberated. In fact, it is already happening. It is Paul's brilliance to identify at once our problem and our savior. He died to sin in order that we might have true life, in wholesome relationship with the world, our fellow humans, our selves, and our God. We can live "in Christ."

The "sinful body" is the body that is enslaved to sin. The body of the life to come, the resurrected body, will live by the Spirit of God. To be liberated from one and live to the other is possible even now. So you see church teaching about sin is both relevant and hopeful. Relevant, because it analyzes the actual life that we have. Hopeful, because it shows us it is possible even now to live in a different way. None of us can be perfected this side of death. But we can be freed of the enslaving tentacles of sin, and at least start to live as people who are free.