

The dangers of ranking sins, a sermon preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 28 February 2016, based on Luke 13:1-9.

“Were the Galileans Pilate killed worse sinners than the rest?” Jesus asked.

“Were the people killed when the tower fell on them, worse offenders?”

Jesus cuts the link between sin and suffering, continuing the trajectory of Hebrew wisdom.

But the way he asks the questions made me wonder - are there better and worse sinners? Are there better and worse sins?

Instinctively we want to say yes.

Perhaps, the greater the harm, the worse the sin?

The actions revealed by war crimes tribunals at Nuremburg and in Rwanda and former Yugoslavia and Cambodia.

Perhaps, the more pervasive the harm, the worse the sin?

The Hebrew prophets railed against corrupted economies that privileged rulers and punished peasants.

Perhaps, the more hypocritical the sinner, the worse it is?

The person who preaches against immorality found guilty of abusing children.

Our own Reformed tradition has been caricatured as a sin ranking tradition.

In the days gone by when elders determined whether people were fit to take communion, an implicit ranking of sin.

Our own city has been satirised as a sin ranking city.

I am not brave enough to read James K. Baxter’s *ode to mixed flatting* written when the University sought to ban mixed flatting in 1967. You could call it a satire on ranking sin.

Our location in society influences how we rank.

People who benefit from existing order lament disorder – so disorder is the greater sin.

People who suffer under the existing order long for change - so existing systems are the greater sin.

How we rank sin often reveals the limits of our perspective.

I read of a Nazi prison officer in one of the concentration camps who was mortified when he struck a prisoner. He had a strong sense of personal decency yet the emaciated prisoner was on his way to the gas chamber with millions of others.

El Emina, the castle on the coast of Ghana. These were the castles to which slaves were brought from inland, and kept until the slave ships arrived. In the middle of the castle was a room used as a chapel. Perhaps Sunday by Sunday the service would have included a confession of sin. Yet, within smelling distance were people chained to stones, and the clanking of chains would have easily been heard in the chapel. When not used for worship, the chapel was a trading room where slave-owners bartered for people. Hundreds of thousands of slaves were transported from El Emina.

In a Bible study in Ghana we discussed whether a man with more than one wife could take Communion. Then we discussed whether people who buy other than fair trade coffee or chocolate could take Communion?

So there are dangers in ranking sin –

- A danger of letting ourselves off the hook by minimising;
- A danger of making too much of what we have done so it pushes aside what is good in life;
- A danger of naming sin as if it defines who the person is, as if they are not created in the image of God;
- A danger of judging people;
- A danger that sees sin primarily as action and not also as possession, that we are all in some way possessed, to use Pannenberg's language;
- A danger that in ranking, we focus on the near and immediate and obvious and miss the more significant yet more hidden. How many of us know whether our clothes were ethically made, for example. I don't know whether mine were.

We seek to overcome these dangers by how we name sin in worship.

In that confession, we name God as love, as forgiver, as merciful.

In the context of forgiveness we affirm human responsibility.

And in that confession we accept that the forces that benefit some and punish others implicate us.

We accept that the choices we make day by day influence whether our society flourishes or dies.

We accept that our own actions reflect human limitation and human possibility.

We accept that what we criticise about society is inside us.

Last week our study groups had their first meeting.

People read the first chapter of Rowan Williams's book, the chapter about baptism.

Feedback suggests people were taken with the thought of baptism emphasising our shared humanity, that baptism can be understood as an act of solidarity rather than a ritual of difference, that we emerge from the waters not just clean, but carrying the grime of the Jordan, that even as Jesus is baptised the old gods still lurk beneath the surface.

That what is evident may not be the most important, that beneath the surface, beyond sight are powerful forces.

Our weekly confession is also a statement of hope. We are people who risk failure, and we risk failure week by week by week.

We are hopeful enough to try and try again.

We have been captivated by a vision of how creation can be, and we seek to be part of bringing that vision to reality, the vision we call the realm of God.

We have been captivated too, by a vision of what the church is meant to be, of the church God is bringing.

God keeps reminding us of that vision in the face of every attempt to shrink it.

We name our missed opportunities in order that we can get up and start again.

Week by week we risk failure, because we believe the vision is worth it.

An example.

On Thursday I participated in a celebration in Sacred Heart Cathedral in Wellington, at the inauguration of a new ecumenical body, the National Dialogue for Christian Unity.

The Catholic, Anglican and Methodist churches came together. The Presbyterians and Salvation Army were there as observers. I found it very sad as the Catholic Cardinal and the Anglican Archbishop and the Methodist representative poured water into a baptismal font, and committed their churches to working together, and there was no Presbyterian representative.

We have accepted a lesser form of unity than the one our Bible and theology holds out.

We have accommodated ourselves to what we imagine is attainable.

Yet we are called to visible unity. There is one body of Christ, not many.

Anything less than bodily unity is a failure.

Without being reminded of the vision, we make decisions on the basis of what works or what people like. We fall short of what God intends.

Such vision has implications for us, here.

We are called to unity, bodily, visible unity, often awkward and often painful unity, among our own family of faith, and with others.

A unity arising from diversity in Christ.

Such unity is very different from uniformity, uniformity of theological perspective or style or cultural preference or age or socio economic status or culture.

When Christ forms our church there is unity in diversity.

In Christ there are not categories of Christians.

Christ works unity among all his people.

And in disunity, we are all implicated.

There is no ranking.

Today, Jesus makes clear the call to repentance is for every human being, to develop a fresh imagination of the new world Christ brings into our everyday.

We trust that Christ is at work among us and among others, digging around, spreading manure, in word and sacrament, in living presence, reminding us of the vision he has for our world and us with it.

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