

Trinity 4 [Proper 9]

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 5 July 2020

Readings: Romans 7 vv 15-25a and Matthew 11 vv 16-19 and 25-end

One of the more hidden consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the lockdown here and in so many places, has been a rise in mental illness, depression and, sadly, suicide – as well as domestic abuse and the breakdown of relationships. That is deeply disturbing, and will have consequences for the whole of society in the months and years to come.

However, at least we are willing to face up to mental illness as precisely that. An illness that can affect anyone is not something of which anyone should be ashamed.

It is, apparently, true that those with a religious commitment are perhaps slightly more likely than average to suffer from depression - largely, it seems, because of the high standards we set ourselves and the guilt we are inclined to feel when we don't live up to those standards. I suspect that I'm not alone amongst clergy in carrying around a fairly large 'guilt list' - a long list of the people I should have visited, the emails I should have answered and the things that I haven't managed to do amongst all the other pressures of life.

The second is that some words and phrases in our liturgy and in our hymns sometimes seem, when taken in isolation, to have the effect of deepening, perhaps unhelpfully, our sense and burden of guilt. Now I'm not for one moment suggesting that we do *not* need to think carefully about our sins - what we do either deliberately or inadvertently to mess things up for ourselves or for other people. Sin is a reality, as St Paul makes very clear in his letter to the Romans. All of us will, I imagine, be able to identify with St Paul's words in today's reading from the letter to the Romans: 'For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.'

Now, I'm aware of the danger of making this the sort of sermon that led the proverbial pious lady in one parish to remark, 'We didn't know what sin was until you came to the parish, Rector.'

But I want to reflect with you for a few minutes about how we deal with this fact of sin in our public worship. It is a good practice for us to consider privately at the end of a day what has happened to us during the day - and to think about how we might have done things better. The important thing about saying sorry is *meaning* it - and as a consequence changing how we behave in future. This private reflection may at times for some of us be supplemented by a formal private act of confession with a priest, either regularly as part of our spiritual discipline, or after some major crisis in our lives. A formal act of confession and absolution is a central feature of most public worship in the Church of England. However, I wonder sometimes whether we notice the strength of the words in the prayers of confession in the Prayer Book and other authorised liturgies.

We may be so familiar with the words that we are not really aware of the strength of the language and the images, but someone coming to the words afresh would, I suspect, be a little surprised. If that person were already anxious or depressed, the very act of saying the words could deepen their sense of guilt in a way that didn't affect the rest of us. Do we really see ourselves as 'miserable offenders' every time we worship at as Prayer Book service of Evensong? Of course, 'miserable' doesn't mean sad or depressed, as it

does in modern English, but rather 'needing to be pitied' or 'needing to receive God's mercy'.

But the words of the absolution are just as important as the words of the confession which we all share. For the Christian, as we reflect on God's word, we become only too aware of ourselves and of our failings - and we could very quickly find ourselves in a spiral of despair. This was very much the problem that Paul seeks to address in the letter to the Romans, as he wrestles with the problem of the Old Testament law, good in itself but incapable of getting people out of the mess into which they are plunged by failure to keep the law. Yet every time we say a prayer of confession, we hear immediately afterwards the declaration that God forgives 'all that with hearty repentance and true faith turn unto him'. That is indeed good news - the heart of the gospel itself. In the Prayer Book Eucharist, this message of God's loving forgiveness, which we cannot earn by our efforts but which is ours only by Jesus' atoning death on the cross, is reinforced by the comfortable words - words that bring comfort to our hearts and minds. These words may be optional in the Common Worship liturgies, but they take us to the heart of the good news of the gospel.

As we hear in today's gospel, Jesus says, 'Come unto me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.'