

### Lent III, 24<sup>th</sup> March 2019: Prayer as Confession

Isaiah 6:1-8; 1 John 1:5-10; Luke 18:9-14

Have you got the hang of the acronym yet? There are four ACTS in prayer – A, C, T, and S: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication – the last just being a fancy word for asking. We're looking at each of them over the weeks of Lent, and today we're on Confession. Part of prayer is Confession.

And the first thing to say is that **it is but a part**. It is one element in the mix, and as with all elements you can have too much or too little of it. If when you pray, you never ever get beyond telling God how sinful you are, how unworthy, well, that's a problem. And if, for you, confession means nothing really – it's just that form of words you trip off at the beginning of the service, but you don't really, fundamentally think are actually true; you don't *really* think of yourself as a sinner in desperate need of mercy and forgiveness, well that's a problem too. Balance. There's more to the Gospel, and so there's more to prayer, than realising you're a sinner. But realising you're a sinner, and owning that - *confessing* - remains fundamental.

Think of it this way. The ACTS acronym starts with A for Adoration, and we heard Brian preach about that last week. 'My God, how great thou art'. When I consider all the works thy hand has made, then sings my soul, 'My God how great thou art.' There's a reason, you know, why orthodox Jews refuse to pronounce even the name of God. They know the word stands for something so awesome, so overwhelming, so beyond all attempts to define and control and deal with, that the human being does better to fall silent. That's what is going on in Isaiah chapter six, our Old Testament reading today. Isaiah is in the Temple, as he no doubt had been many times, just like us many times here perhaps. And then suddenly reality breaks in. The curtain is pulled back, and through the familiar surrounding, the familiar service, Isaiah is suddenly let see what is really going on, and Who is really present. 'I saw the Lord, sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the seraphs were calling 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory.' The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke."

Well, your prayer, and this service, might not feel like that very often. The curtain, perhaps, remains for the most part firmly shut. But, perhaps, consider yourself lucky, given Who is really here. Your pivots would shake if you faced Him. He is the Power of all Powers, the Goodness beyond imagination. He is the one for whom even the Sun itself, burning furiously in the sky, is but a pale image. Holy, Holy, Holy. If you have the faintest comprehension of who you are dealing with in worship, then the only rational response is to fall down with Isaiah: 'woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!' And it doesn't really matter if you are Mother Theresa or Genghis Khan. Or in the story Jesus told, a Pharisee or a tax collector. Faced with God, all of us are the same. There's no point trying to work who's a little bit better, or a little bit worse. Or even a lot better, and a lot worse. Faced with God, there is no haggling, but only one response: 'woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.'

Note, incidentally, that I'm not trying to say there is no real distinction between Mother Theresa and Genghis Khan. Sometimes Christians talk as if there's not, as if all sin is just sin, and that being grumpy with your partner is essentially the same kind of thing as genocide,

just on a smaller scale. Well, no. There are degrees of wickedness, some things and some people really are worse than others. But the point of Jesus' story about the two men in the Temple is that whilst that might be true, faced with God it doesn't really do you much good. The important comparison to make is not that with each other, but with God – and next to him, whatever bit of goodness we have seems paltry. Which is why indeed people like Mother Theresa, those who are exceptionally close to God, are often *more* conscious of their sins than others. We look at them and think well, what have *you* got to feel guilty about? You're amazing. But *they're* looking at God. And because they see him more clearly than most, they see themselves more clearly too, and know quite how unlike God they are. So, usually, the more holy you are the more conscious of your own sin you will be, and the less inclined to compare yourself favourably with others.

And indeed, for the really holy person, others soon come to play a rather different part in prayer. *I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.* I am part of a people who've drifted from God, who have told and believed all kinds of lies, who have justified the most terrible things to ourselves. I am part of a people who sent each other to Auschwitz, who exploit each other, who cheat and betray each other. It may not always have been me, personally - although in God's clear light I see to my shock how it sometimes, perhaps often, was. But it was always my people. Human beings did this, and I am human. And before God I am not just a 'me', I am part of 'us', and *we* are lost, a people of unclean lips. The really holy person doesn't compare themselves to others: he belongs with them. And so when he confesses, it's not just his sins, but the sins of the world. It's not that I am better or worse than anyone else God, it's just that Lord, **we** are perishing. Lord have mercy.

And then the remarkable thing happens. Think back to Isaiah again, broken and unclean, laid low in the Temple. What happens next? An angel takes one of the burning coals, touches it to his lips, those unclean lips, and tells him that his guilt is departed and his sin blotted out. *And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, whom shall I send, and who will go for us? And I said, send me.* And so begins one of the greatest ministries in Israel: the prophet who saw more of God and said more of God than so many others, the man whose voice echoes in England twenty seven centuries later. God does not want him to remain just broken. God is not interested in just overwhelming people, making them feel small and worm-like. No, God wants to raise people up, to make them the ones through whom He speaks and acts. When Isaiah says he is a man of unclean lips, God's reaction is not to say 'Quite right. Cower and squirm, evil-doer, in the dust where you belong'. Rather he says, 'Wonderful. And now we can get started. Now you can be what you were meant to be. My servant. My messenger. My friend.'

It's a simple point really. God is gracious. How he deals with the one who will not repent, who never confesses their sin, we may wonder about. That is one of the great and terrible questions of our faith. But one thing we know. As 1 John, our New Testament reading said, *'if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.'* God does not want to blame and punish and destroy: God wants what he always wanted, for human beings to be the ones through whom his power and glory and goodness shone in the world, to be his image. God wants to forgive, to heal, to make beautiful. When you confess your sins before God, it is not to the angry headteacher, or the punishing policeman. It is to Jesus, who always, only, wants to save us. To Jesus, who will never, ever reject those who truly repent. God – Jesus – is light, and in him there is no darkness at all. No room for your darkness – for your greed and lust and violence. All that

will be driven out. But no either room for *any* darkness: there is no blame and hate and destruction in God. Let *this God* know who you really are, at your very, very worst - and you will find not blame but healing for your soul.

One final thought. One of the wisest Christians I ever knew put it like this to me. Prayer, he said, is largely about learning to see yourself and the world through God's eyes. Seeing yourself and the world through God's eyes. You see with utter clarity. You see how things really are – with no spin, no excuses, no favourable shading, just the bare reality of things in their utter honesty. So far, so threatening. Who wants to be seen like that? But God's eyes are eyes not just of utter clarity, but of utter love. He sees not just what we have made of ourselves, but what He made us to be, and what – if we let him – He will yet make of us. He sees me, and you, and you, and them, and He sees his sons and daughters, crowned in glory. Broken men and women made new and made glorious. That's what we learn to see when we confess our sins. That's what we hope for. That's what begins. What is there left to say but Amen.

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