

15<sup>th</sup> September 2019, Trinity XIII

Exodus 32:7-14; 1 Tim 1:12-17; Lk.15:1-10

### *The Chief of Sinners*

I tried this week to imagine a deeply implausible pastoral conversation. St. Paul comes to see me, looking for spiritual advice. He is afflicted, tormented, by guilt. He is filled with gloom and negativity, he can find nothing good say about himself – he is, as he said in his First Letter to Timothy, the foremost among sinners. As the KJV puts it, the chief of sinners. I'm the worst, he says, the worst you have ever come across. I am vileness.

What would your reaction be to someone who spoke like that?

Mine would be to suspect that they're not really quite as bad as that. Sure, it is *possible* that the person in front of you turns out to be a horrendous killer or abuser, but more likely – and in Paul's case – not. I mean, yes, Paul has much to repent of: he's right, he had cursed Jesus, he had persecuted the church, he had joined in with the killing of Stephen and if not prevented, he would have done more. He has not exactly always been a wonderful, lovely person. But still, I'd want to say that his guilt was overdone. The chief of sinners: really? Look, Paul: when Stephen was killed, you weren't one of the decision makers. You cheered what was happening, yes, but you didn't make it happen: you were just swept along, like so many others. You didn't even throw a stone. And as for the persecution, you did that with the best of intentions, you did what your conscience told you had to be done. And it didn't involve torture, rape, killing – none of the things the really wicked do. And for goodness sake Paul, just look at what you've done since: look at how you've served God, all the people you have loved and helped and given the hope of the Gospel to. Chief of sinners: come on. Listen, it is good that you stay sensible about yourself, that you remember your mistakes and stay humble – but honestly, calling yourself the chief of sinners is not doing that. In its own way it's a kind of egotism. It's as if you're obsessed with your past and can't get over yourself. What you need to is lighten up. Go easy on yourself. You're not that bad.

I've actually had that conversation with very many people. Some people do seem to be weighed down with a sense of being bad, being guilty, which doesn't really have much basis in reality. And if you can get them to see things with a bit more objective detachment, a bit more good sense, then that is a good thing. But I wonder what St. Paul would say if I tried the same tactic on him. I think he might say something like this: Listen, young man. I get that you are trying to make me feel better. I get that your instinct is to soothe, to reassure, to minimise my guilt and boost my self-image. I understand that you think you're looking after me, caring for me. But listen: in fact, all you're doing is offering me false comfort. The right thing to say to someone like me – which, by the way, means pretty much everyone – is actually, yes, you're right. Your sense of guilt, of gone-wrong lostness, of being the chief of sinners is onto something: something *has* gone deeply wrong in you. You really are in deep spiritual trouble -and yes, while from one angle there are definitely people who have done worse things than you have, that's not really much help, because you were never meant to judge yourself against *them*. You were meant to be the image of God, someone bursting over with joy and goodness and love: that's what you've fallen short of, that's what you've lost. So yes, Paul, and yes everyone of you, in those dark moments when you stare at yourself in horror and can say only, 'chief of sinners' – you're not wrong. That, Mr. Pastor, St Paul would say, is what you should say to someone like me.

Because only then, do you see, can you tell them what the Gospel of Jesus really is. The Gospel is not that they are OK really, that they're not as bad as they thought they were, and that in any case there are plenty of people who are worse. That's not a Gospel. The Gospel is that they are loved. Not that they're OK, but that they're loved. Their future, their hope, their salvation does not depend on them not being *too* bad, not being *too* lost, but on the God who loves them so much that He comes after them. That he goes into whatever dark lostness they have got themselves into, hoists them onto his shoulders and carries them home. That's what Jesus meant, you see, when he spoke of the shepherd going into the wilderness to find that lost sheep, or in that story about a woman determinedly searching out that lost coin. That's what he meant on the Cross, when he went into the pit of human failure and sin and suffering, into every aspect of ours lostness. He didn't tell us not to be silly, that we weren't that lost after all. No: he dived in, and rescued us. Out of the depths. I am not OK, St. Paul would say to me, and you're not OK. You are something far, far better: you are loved. Understand that. And tell the world that. Because that's what it needs to hear. Amen.