

*Sermon St Mark's Day 2004...*

It is St Mark's Day. And St Mark is renowned for his straight talking. His language is terse and to the point. Sometimes it seems almost brutal – like this terrible warning which Mark puts into the mouth of Jesus: *Whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.*

“Adulterous and sinful generation” – an apt phrase for our times in which sin and sex are made to mean exactly the same. “My night of sin. My days of shame” blare the tabloids and even the broadsheets these days. Parsons are supposed to be experts on sin of course or, as one parochial church council said to their priest, “O vicar, we didn't know what sin was until you came to the parish.” Though we pride ourselves on our so called liberation we are screwed up, as it were, about sex. In any case sexual liberation only makes us slaves to our desires. Celebrities are expected to be at it all the time; but then any particular celeb can be hounded in the media for allegedly having an affair – like Mr Beckham for instance. It's only a new version of the old hypocrisy which wanted bridegrooms to have a bit of form and experience but expected all brides to be pure as the driven snow.

And then we advertise sex to our children over years of sex education. Never so much sex education and never so many unwanted pregnancies. When will the sex educators get the message that advertising works? And what are the moral principles underlying contemporary sex education? There is only one. The whole of the moral law has been reduced to one first and great commandment: THOU SHALT WEAR A CONDOM. But the view of sexual relations summed up in the slogan WEAR A CONDOM is only a dehumanised world, a market in sexual commodities – a market we are expected to enter without shame and leave without damage. A world in which anything goes.

Let's have another try at discerning when sex is sinful. Sex is sinful when it becomes one more aspect of consumerism. The phrase is “having sex” – no different from having a hamburger, a cigarette or a mental breakdown. Contrast the consumer rhetoric of “having sex” with the beautiful and morally significant phrase “making love”. Roger Scruton points out that in modern depictions of sexual behaviour, “...the face is more or less ignored. Only the sexual organs construed not as agents but as patients – or rather impatient – carry the burden of contact. Sexual organs, unlike faces, can be treated as instruments: they are means to the common aim of friction and therefore infinitely substitutable. In this way, the sexual act ceases to be an expression of interpersonal longing, still less of the desire to have and to hold, to be filled with love. It becomes instead a kind of sacrilege – a wiping away of freedom, personality and transcendence, to reveal the obscene contortions of what is merely flesh.”

There are two sorts of sins: sins against God and sins against one another. The sin against God is idolatry – that is to worship something other than God. And I'll come back to this. Sins against one another all arise out of our habit of treating people not as ends in themselves but as means to our own ends: in fact treating people not as people at all but as objects. We should not treat people objectively at all. As the great philosopher Kierkegaard said, “We are objective towards others but subjective towards ourselves. The real task is to be subjective towards others and objective

towards ourselves.” Instead of this – instead of forgiving others and confessing our own faults – we only make excuses for ourselves and blame our friends and neighbours for everything that goes wrong.

Sin is not just a matter of sex. St Paul gives us a whole list of sins: pride, envy, vainglory, strife, hypocrisy, backbiting... But when did you ever hear of anyone thrown out of the Mothers’ Union for envy or barred from the choir trip for backbiting?

But what about this sin against God? This sin of idolatry? Well we don’t bow down before little carved figures of men and animals these days, do we? Not conspicuously. Not in public anyway. Instead the object of idolatry is what it always really was: worship of the self. People don’t offer meat to idols these days: they just stuff themselves to bursting. And so there is the plague of obesity, the phenomenon of people waddling down the street resembling barrage balloons. But before the plague of obesity – and why do we always give technical medical names to ordinary faults, as if vices were diseases? – before the plague of obesity is the habit of greed. And the opposite of obesity is anorexia. But how opposite are these things really? Not opposites at all, but both symptoms of our self-pandering: of our idolatry; of putting ourselves and our desires in the place of God.

Really we adore ourselves. Body beautiful – if you’re one of the lucky and rare few. But perfect serenity, freedom from all ills and anxieties – as if we ever could have such freedom in a fallen world. This idolatry wants to preserve us from all stress and mental discomfort. D’you know I read that when the journalists went to cover the anniversary of the D-Day landings, they were offered counselling. Unbelievable. The soldiers who turned up on the Normandy beaches for real in June 1944 weren’t offered counselling. I’d love to hear the reply of any Tommy who was. Then there are the health and safety regulations which are bankrupting individuals and businesses alike just because our politically correct culture insists on trying to make the world perfect. Every niche and portal has to have disabled access. Can you just hear Wing Commander Douglas Bader telling Squadron Leader Johnny Johnson or Cats’ Eyes Cunningham that he was applying for a disabled access for his Spitfire?

This is not of course to say that we should not strive to make things better: but merely to insist that sin is not removable. Sin is not a little bit of bother requiring remedial attention. Sin is the natural condition of humanity. And it is persistent throughout history. Sin will only be done away at the end of history. Perhaps the greatest achievement of the devil is to persuade us that morals are changeable but science is fixed. Actually, it is science that changes all the time. Every beautiful hypothesis is always eventually slain by one brute new fact. Co-ordinate geometry succeeds Euclid and Newton is corrected by Einstein. It is science which is in a constant state of flux. But the moral law is as valid today as when it was first delivered to Moses.

The good news is that sin itself is possible only in a moral universe. In our contemporary demoralised world, a world without moral rules, neither “wrong” nor “right” have any meaning. If there is no possibility of doing wrong, there is no possibility of doing right either. And so “praise” and “blame” too become meaningless. The gospel news is that it is not a matter of being saved by our goodness – for we have very little goodness and that we have comes through God’s grace. The

gospel news is that you can acknowledge your sin and be sorry. You can start again. The only unforgivable sin is to refuse to acknowledge our sin – and so make ourselves unable to receive forgiveness. Or as the Prayer Book says at the start of Matins and Evensong: *If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, he is just and faithful to forgive us all our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*