Bristol Cathedral

A Sermon preached at the Cathedral Eucharist, 9th March 2014,
By The Dean

Sin (Romans 5:12-19)

There is a slim book on the shelves of a few university libraries; rarely borrowed. There is a copy in the Deanery, but my family would not be able to tell you where. It is *my* book: all you ever wanted to know (and indeed, quite a lot you did not want to know) about the theology of early seventeenth century England. Even I do not recommend it… unless you are having problems sleeping. If I tell you my own mother could not finish it, you will understand this book is not for the faint-hearted. So, I don't go to dinner parties and recount theological anecdotes from the 1620s and I don't preach sermons about John Calvin and the Lambeth Articles.

Until today. Today we have in front of us Romans Chapter 5:

> *sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned*

You will know that St Paul has things to say about sin, but did you know that he says what he has to say almost exclusively in Romans? More than three quarters of his references to sin come in this letter. And it is challenging. In another translation:

> *no one exempt from either sin or death*

Paul thinks we are fundamentally corrupt. Not weak, not careless, nor accident prone, but corrupt. The word he uses for sin – *harmatia* – means, essentially, that we will forever take aim and then we will forever miss the mark. In Romans Three he argued:

> *There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God*
>
> *Romans 3:10-11*

Paul thinks we have a fatal flaw, bred in the bone. And this is where I can summon up the Seventeenth Century because then, they really knew how to describe it. Here is John Calvin on human sin and for the best part of a hundred years everyone who preached in this cathedral had read John Calvin. This is the way we used to tell it:

> *Can you exempt yourself from the number of those whose feet are swift to shed blood; whose hands are foul with rapine and murder; whose throats are like open sepulchres; whose tongues are deceitful; whose lips are venomous; whose actions are*

useless, unjust, rotten, deadly; whose soul is without God; whose inward parts are full of wickedness…

Institutes of the Christian Religion II.3.3

Now, God bless us all, we just don't talk like that any longer. I can't remember when Canon Robert last told me that my throat is an open sepulchre. The language has changed and the idea that the person next to you and, indeed, you yourself, might be most accurately described as *useless, unjust, rotten,* and *deadly* seems awfully impolite.

Why? It is what St Paul says; it is *exactly* what Paul means. It is what was said here again and again for hundreds of years. Why have we stopped using this language? Well, one reason we changed our minds was because we were finding it difficult. We couldn't help asking 'Why would a good God make us so bad?' On top of that, we did not like being so depressed and so hopeless. If the Dean is *useless, unjust, rotten, deadly*; if Mr Cameron, and Barack Obama and Pope Francis and even Stephen Fry and Lady Gaga are *useless, unjust, rotten,* and *deadly;* then what is the point of anything? We don't like this language because it is *off-message*. We prefer to hear that God is good and that individuals, you and me, can make a difference. This is the great age of ambition and aspiration, the great age of Barack Obama's 'Yes we can'. Paul is the spectre at the feast, clutching a cup of the grapes of wrath and muttering darkly, 'O, No we can't'.

We prefer our God and our people good, we prefer it *positive*. As a friend of mine once put it, we are all liberal Americans insisting that all will be well because there are three things you can trust. You can trust:

The fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man and the neighbourhood of Boston

We have become so *reasonable*. We turned the heat down and we have turned away from what we used to say. We have done that deliberately, it is something we have thought about and argued our way into. So, someone like Karen Armstrong says,

Jesus did not spend a great deal of time discoursing about the trinity or original sin or the incarnation, which have preoccupied later Christians. He went around doing good and being compassionate

That is where we have got, everything will turn out nice, because you are nice, and I am even nicer.

Now, I am sure you know where this is heading. You are bracing yourself for the moment when the Dean tells you that he thinks Paul had a point and it is not nice at all.

That is exactly what I think. You may need a little persuading. Let's start with the way things are. Do you remember Dunblane in 1996? Sixteen children and their teacher were gunned down and the head afterwards said 'Evil visited us today and we don't know why'. That is part of what I am talking about, that dark chaotic, unpredictable, and unreasonable energy that keeps breaking out. It is more than that though. Francis Spufford tells a story about an eighty-eight year old Bernard Montgomery having a sudden crisis in the night, so bad that

his house-keeper rang one of his old battalion commanders and asked him to come round straight away. When he got there and asked what the matter was Montgomery said 'I have got to go to meet God and to explain all those men I killed at Alamein'. Now Montgomery did not sacrifice people in vain, but he knew that even his best efforts did not end well. Put another way, by someone else: whilst none of us think that Richard Nixon was a particularly good man, we do not think of him as *useless, unjust, rotten, deadly*; we do not think he was fundamentally and utterly wicked. And yet you can move link by link from the judgements that Nixon made to an image that haunts many of us still – the image of a naked nine year old girl in Vietnam screaming on a road because she had been burnt by phosphorous jelly. That is what I mean. That ordinary people find they have done terrible things. I mean that our worked experience is that our best efforts do not turn out well. The familiar liberal convictions do not deliver. They do not deliver in Syria, they did not deliver in Bosnia, in Rwanda, in Cambodia, or in Buchenwald or Auschwitz.

I mentioned Francis Spufford a moment ago. A little over a year ago he wrote an extraordinary book called *Unapologetic – Why despite everything Christianity can still make surprising emotional sense*. Spufford belongs precisely to the intelligent Guardian reading, liberal and literate world where everyone assumes we will soon do better. Yet, when he writes about faith he does not begin where you might expect, with all that stuff about awe and spirituality and feeling better and doing good. He actually says none of us can live in a state of awe; that is not what life is like:

> *I think of awe as a sort of National Trust property among feelings: somewhere to visit from time to time, but not a place you can live.*

Where we begin, says Spufford, is in the experience of messing up (actually he puts it rather more strongly than that, with words deans don't use in the pulpit). It is common ground; we mess things up.

> *We reach one of those stages of our lives where the sorrow of our failures hangs in our chests like a weight and waking up in the morning is painful because every time the memory of what's wrong has to ooze back over the lovely blackness of the night.*

Now you may not feel like that, I very much hope you don't feel like that. It is not essential that you feel like that, but you do need to think about the world as it is and we are we are. We have to stop hiding behind the cushions we have collected. We need to accept that Paul was right and it is not nice out there. It is not even nice in here.

That is why Paul thought we need saving. That is why St John believes that you can't tinker with things and make them better. The world isn't a place where you will be saved, the world is actually what you need saving *from*.

> *This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil*
>
> *John 3:19*

Now, what we have been dealing with this morning is the doctrine of original sin. It is strong stuff and it is not easy. There are questions here I have not had time to answer, stones I have not turned over. There is not time in one sermon. There is a Lent Course this year all about evil we can talk further in that. I am also wondering whether, now and again, it might be worth offering a chance to take your coffee after the service and talk about the sermon you have heard for a few minutes. You might tell me if you think that is a good or a bad idea.

This morning I only have time to say this. We make Lent into a season of self-determination, we eat less, drink less, pray more. Good things to do, all of them. There are, though, two ideas which should matter more. The first is the memory of the forty days in the wilderness when Jesus was tempted, and found that temptation is real and dangerous. The second essential element in Lent is that it's a journey towards Good Friday, when sin – our sin – clung so closely to our fear that we drove love from the city and crucified him. This is a season in which we take sin seriously and remember what it does. That is what Paul asks of us. Sin is real and sin is dangerous and deep. That is the essence of Lent. We need saving – saving from this world and saving from ourselves. Salvation has come to us, it is equally real and it is yet more powerful; but salvation is not the story for today. Today, let us ask again why and when we stopped taking Paul seriously. And let us take sin seriously.