

A String of Pearls

Sourcesheet 2: Confession

The penitential section of the service (The Confession) seems to fall into two parts - an invitation and the confession itself, but it might be better to think of this as a 4-part sequence:

Invitation – including the commandments (Exodus 20: 1-17) or Summary of the Law

Reflection – thinking about our own lives in the context of the commandments

Confession – Congregational prayer

Absolution – a declaration by the person presiding

This sequence is both about our attitudes to our lives as Christians and to God and about individual 'sins'. This part of worship enables us, through the prayers of penitence, to come to a place where we can humbly *let God put things right with us* - though this may at times mean that we may have to do something for or seek forgiveness from someone else.

The Invitation to Confession is to give people an opportunity to call sins to mind.

The time of reflection is significant – silence is often used here. Silence is used at a number of places during worship

Sin has become a difficult word in our culture, its misuse and mis-appropriation by many people in the past has led to many people shying away from using it. It has been used too often in the past as a weapon by those in power to control others. The term is very important in Christianity, it often refers to our sense of self-awareness and those things which limit us or cause us to cause sadness, loss or harm to others. While there is a moral dimension to sin, it is not the only or even necessarily, the most important dimension, sin is not to be equated with just being 'naughty'. Sin is more to do with those things which cause our relationships to become strained or broken, including our relationship with ourselves and especially our relationship with God.

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

(1 John 1: 5-9)

... confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

(James 5:16)

The penitential section of the service tends to be understood in the singular, individuals are invited to confess their sins. But the language is plural 'our' sins, this is also what is found in the Lord's Prayer – '...forgive us our sins, as we forgive...'. This gives some ambiguity to think about, sin is not always just about individuals; there is also something that we might call 'collective sin' such as racism, poverty, slavery and oppression – indeed all those things (and more!) which we noted when considering praxis in the introduction.

In the Christian life sin is tied inextricably with forgiveness – both from God and from ourselves. The Lord's Prayer asks us to forgive others' sins. To do this we may feel that we have to make some kind of judgement about what a 'sin against us' might actually be. We can find it very easy to see things as sin from our point of view which might not be seen in that way by others. In this case it is as well to remember the words of Isaiah and leave the judgement to God – or, in this case, to God's anointed servant, Christ:

His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
(Isaiah 11: 3-4)

This makes us truly think – what Jesus might say or do when faced with this situation. This is the basis of our confession.

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Talksheet 2 —Confession

Psalm 51

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WELCOME – Breaking the ice (Aim for 10 mins)

Psalm 100

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.
Worship the Lord with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.

Know that the Lord is God.
It is he that made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him, bless his name.

For the Lord is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.

To start the session read Psalm 100 together.
After a moments' stillness read it again and think
especially of the line—
'his steadfast love endures forever'.

Does anything last forever?
**Do we do something in our worship which lasts
forever?**

WORD – Applying the truth (Aim for 45 mins)

Alongside the basic fact that God made us good is the equally basic fact that we have gone wrong. We pray our sins to get to the truth about ourselves and to find out how God treats sinners. Our experience of sins does not consist in doing some bad things but in being bad. It is a fundamental condition of our existence, not a temporary lapse into error. Praying our sin isn't deciding not to sin anymore; it is discovering what God has decided to do with us as sinners.

1. **Read Psalm 51.** The psalm title refers this prayer to David's adultery with Bathsheba. Briefly summarize the details of this episode in 2 Samuel 11-12.

2. How many different synonyms for sin are in his prayer?

3. What does this tell us about the nature of sin?

4. What is God asked to do about sin? (Count and name the verbs.)

5. If I have been a sinner from birth (v. 5), sin must be something more than doing wrong things.
What else could it be?

6. Verses 1-9 exhibit a heightened awareness of sin. What do they make you aware of?

7. Verse 10 is the central sentence. How does it centre the prayer?

What parallel does “create” have with Genesis 1:1?

8. Forgiveness is an internal action with external consequences. What are some of them (vv. 13-17)?

9. What do you understand a “broken and contrite heart” to be (v.17)?

What is your experience of this condition?

10. According to verses 18-19, what is the relationship between personal forgiveness and social righteousness?

11. Psalm 51 makes us aware of how sinful we are, and it makes us less actively sinful.
How do you see it working that way in you?

12. In church on Sunday we confess our sins to God, how is this spiritual practice similar to or different from the ways of the world?

13. How can we use this spiritual practice in our ordinary everyday Monday to Saturday lives?

WITNESS – Reaching out to others (Aim for 20 – 30 minutes)

Giving Thanks to God

Thank God for His forgiveness.

Praying for one another

Ask everyone to share something they would like prayer for.
Then go round the room and pray for the person to your right,

Praying for those who don't yet know God

How have you shown God's character as you go about your ordinary everyday life?