

30.3.22

Lent Course

Prov 23: 15-21

1Thes 4: 1-8

Lust & Gluttony

It is human nature to categorise the Seven Deadly Sins, and top of the list comes lust and gluttony, which are very similar in the in both there is an over-indulgence in seeking to satisfy a bodily appetite; and both are easily identifiable.

In many ways these are the most obvious of the sins which assail us, and it's sad to say that too often the other sins are lost sight of. One only has to remember the Puritans of the 17th century, and especially in the Calvinistic Scottish Church, where those caught in adultery were taken before the kirk session and condemned for adultery or getting a woman with child and were excluded from the church – yet very little, if anything, was ever said about the covetousness of the Elder whose work-people were underpaid and poorly housed, or the shrewish tongue of the bitterly moral woman, or the harsh pride of the self-consciously righteous. Truly did Jesus say “Judge not!” To know all is to forgive all – and only one knows all!

Of all the 7 Deadly sins, these two are, perhaps, the easiest to understand and some of the hardest to conquer. They arise out of a natural and good desire which has become warped. Eating and sex are built into

our very being and are good in themselves, but not when we have lost control of our urges and begin to over-emphasise our appetites. I suspect that we all know the effect of over-eating as we have experienced the sluggishness and torpor which can follow our Christmas lunch

Because there is pleasure attached to both lust and gluttony, without self-control it is easy to over-indulge. This may be a simple desire to prolong the pleasure. But it may well have deeper causes, being a substitute for unfulfilled longings, a sense of inadequacy or loneliness.

It has been said that 'lust and reason are enemies', for lust makes people do, which in saner and quieter moments they know to be wrong. We have a choice and it's as well to remember that love and goodness exist because of that freedom to choose. Once we've chosen, the consequences flow inexorably. The first step makes the second that much easier. It is well said that: "Whosoever strives to keep himself pure receives power to do so; and whosoever is impure, to him is the door of vice open."

I have often said that sin is equated to selfishness, and that is true here. One can also think of it as a good which has become misdirected. This is particularly true of lust, where the desire to satisfy oneself is usually at the expense of another person, treating him or her as an

object, exploiting one's power over others. Sadly, such behaviour brings no satisfaction, merely degradation. As someone has said, "pleasure pursued for its own end leads to torment." "When a person so forgets his obligations to God and immerses himself in the so-called pleasures of life, that he becomes possessed by lust, by desire, all is lost indeed." It should be remembered that sex touches so many aspects of our lives - family life, friendship, social acceptance, loyalty. William Barclay says that: "Sex before marriage demands privilege without responsibility; it demands rights without commitment."

In societies where the knowledge of God has become lost, and where so much emphasis is upon the individual, it's hardly surprising that so many have lost their way, and the sins which can assail us all come into prominence. There is no moral compass to guide society, and the things which have secondary importance receive prominence over our humanity. What are basic to our wellbeing are our relationships, and the satisfaction of our basic needs. Remove that sense of reliance both on God and on those near us, and the secondary become over-emphasised so that people go after wealth, or fame, or sex, or over-eating, or power. The more open we are to others, the more ready to share with them the richer life becomes. The more cut off we become, the more we centre upon ourselves, the less satisfying life becomes, until ultimately it loses all sense of meaning and there is the desperate drive to see fulfilment through the abuse

of our appetites. The talk about the Metaverse, being pushed by Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, that virtual realm that people can inhabit fills me with horror, for we shall become even more cut off from others and from life.

It is all too easy to limit lust and gluttony to sexual laxity and to over eating. The Greek word used in the Bible means 'desires', and of course, this can apply to many other appetites - to drink, to riches, to smoking. It may also apply to the person who talks incessantly, is 'in your face' and certainly is unlikely to hear anything said to him or her.

St Paul makes clear that we are all called to holiness, and that means gaining mastery over our appetites and remember that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that we suppress our appetites so that we can say, as some of the desert fathers did: "that I have overcome all passion in myself", only to be told by his confessor, to go away and pray for temptation if he wanted to be fully human. Living with temptation is part of what it means to be human. Going down that path, not knowing the struggles of others, it is too easy to become proud, suppressing good feelings and so build up barriers between ourselves and others, which ultimately will destroy us. Remember, Jesus came offering us a life in all its fullness.

The freedom Christ offers is freedom from fear; freedom from the power of our desires. We shall not experience that freedom if we pretend that we are unaffected by desire. So often it is fear that prevents us facing the truth about ourselves, and we can only pray that the Spirit will strengthen us to be honest with ourselves and accept the power God provides to lift us out of our sinful ways.

As Christ's witnesses, we have also to beware of becoming moralisers. It is so easy to condemn someone who has sinned and treat them as they treated the poor of old – it's their own fault! We have to learn to follow the example of Jesus in his treatment of the woman caught in the act of adultery. He did not condemn her, but he didn't condone her either. He sent her away with the words "Sin no more". We have to be those who act likewise, and who make it possible for such people to be helped on the truer path.

"One of the elders said: 'It is not because evil thoughts come to us that we are condemned, but only because we make use of the evil thoughts. It can happen that from these thoughts we suffer shipwreck; but it can also happen that because of them we may be crowned.'"

Two monks were out walking and came to a river. There was an attractive young woman wanting to cross, so the elder of the two carried her across. When they got back to the monastery that evening, the younger one

upbraided the older one for what he had done. The more experienced monk castigated the younger one: “When I put that girl down I left her by the waters’ her edge; but you are still carrying her; let her go!” Or as Martin Luther said to a young man plagued by lustful thoughts: “You can’t stop the birds flying to and fro in the air, but you can certainly stop them nesting in your hair.”