

First Sunday After Trinity

From the Second Lesson: “[W]e also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received our reconciliation. Therefore ... sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned....”⁴

In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

There is an anecdote about “Silent Cal” Coolidge, a native Vermonter and the famously taciturn 30th President of the United States. Supposedly one Sunday morning he went to their local Congregationalist Church while, for some reason, his vivacious wife, Grace, stayed home. When he returned, she asked him what the minister had preached on and Cal said just one word, “Sin.” So she asked him what the minister had to say about sin, to which Cal is said to have replied, “He was agin it.”

One point of the anecdote is, or at any rate used to be, that we naturally expect – or at least we used naturally to expect – that any preacher of the Gospel would be “agin” sin.

So, from this perspective, Silent Cal was conveying to his wife no new information whatever. Further from that same perspective, we naturally expect – or at least we used naturally to expect – that any such preacher would spend a considerable portion of his pulpit ministry on the subject of sin, so, again, Cal was telling Grace nothing new or useful.

Theme:

We, however, no longer live in the same world that Calvin and Grace Coolidge did. People in general no longer revere the solid New England (and Western, and Southern) virtues of hard work, self-reliance, plain speaking, and personal economy that the Coolidges exemplified in their own lives. Politicians no longer work to lower taxes, reduce the public indebtedness, and shrink the size of the Federal government as Calvin did throughout his two terms as President.

And, especially, preachers no longer spend much time discussing the subject of Sin, unless it is the meaningless concept of “social sins” which are so formless and general that they invoke no personal responsibility whatever. To these preachers, all that is required are large subventions from the public fisc and then these “social sins” will vanish, apparently as the modern social-engineering rebirth of the Old Testament “sin offering”.

**The first thing we have to understand is
that there is, indeed, such a thing as Sin
and it is ever with us.**

“Sin is separation from God. It is the setting of our self-will in place of God’s Will.”⁵ This is the overall theme of today’s First Lesson, the story of Adam and Eve’s fall from innocence and from grace. That tendency in us has persisted ever since. As God told Moses, “[T]his people ... will forsake me and break my covenant which I have made with them. Then my anger will be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them and hide my face from them....”⁶ And as Micah wrote, “Then they will cry to the LORD, but he will not answer them; he will hide his face from them at that time, because they have made their deeds evil.”⁷

When today’s Second Lesson tells us “all men sinned”,⁸ it is telling us such Sin is an inescapable consequence of our being the creatures of a God who has given us both the power of rational thought and freedom of our Wills which direct that thought.

When someone makes the conscious, deliberate decision to take an action that is contrary to God's Will, that decision is necessarily an *individual* act of the human Will.

And, as G. K. Chesterton is said to have observed, we need only look around us to see that men and women frequently and enthusiastically exercise their God-given freedom of their wills to make decisions and to take actions that directly flout God's directives to us. As St. James wrote, "[E]ach person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full-grown brings forth death."⁹

Hence, Sin is an ever-present reality and the consequence of that reality, unchecked, is our loss of God's favor and protection. That being so, if Calvin Coolidge's pastor was conscientious in his duties, how could he have helped but raise with his congregation the difficult but urgent topic of Sin and how, having raised it, could he have taken any position other than to have been against it? His task, after all, was to reconcile his people to God, not to stand silently by and so let them keep severing themselves from God.

The second thing we have to understand is that all Sin is, at bottom, personal Sin, not

collective or group Sin.

We have just seen that, at bottom, all Sin is the result of individual decisions and actions. A group, after all, has no Will of its own; what appears to be its Will is in reality only the aggregate effect of the accumulation of the personal decisions and actions of all that group's members.

But if all Sin is the product of individual Wills, then, too, all Sin is, at bottom, the personal responsibility of the individuals who commit such Sins. However much sense it may make for the political historian to say that the Nazi Party in Germany committed great crimes against European minorities, to the moral theologian, such a statement is meaningless.

The National Socialist German Workers Party had no rational Will that could form, or be held responsible for, its acts. Morally, what it did was to provide a framework and support structure that, by saying certain behavior was required by some abstract "Volk" or people, facilitated thousands upon thousands of mortally sinful decisions by individual members of that Party. And it takes only a few shining examples of resistance to such collective suggestions such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn to show that, no matter how much social and institutional approval is brought to bear in favor of oppression, injustice,

and crime, the God-given human spirit is always capable of distinguishing good from evil and of refusing the proffered opportunities to Sin.

The same is true of the massively organized criminal enterprises and mass murders that marked the Soviet Communist regime, the Maoist gang that still strangles mainland China, or seemingly psychotic outbreaks such as the Pol Pot insanity in Cambodia and the intertribal genocide in Rwanda. Each individual who participated in those horrors bears personal responsibility before God for his or her personal decisions to assist or, on the contrary, to resist those immense evils.

Remember, what St. James wrote is that “each person is tempted”,¹⁰ not that “our whole society is tempted”. Sin is personal, not collective.

The third thing we have to understand about Sin is that God’s Will for us, following which is the only means we have to avoid Sin, is to be found in the traditions He handed over to His Church.

It is precisely because Sin is always a personal act and therefore a personal responsibility that we must always

be on our guard to avoid it. But we cannot possibly avoid it unless we are equipped to identify it and the principal means given to us for identifying it – that is, for discerning God’s Will for us – is in God’s Revelation to us.

The essence of that Revelation is summed up in the opening words of the Letter to the Hebrews: “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the world.”¹¹

That Revelation, however, is almost exclusively to be found in the written and oral records of God’s dealings with and teachings of humanity, that is, in Scripture¹² and in the other Tradition of the Church. “Tradition”, after all, means simply “that which has been handed over”. As St. Paul said, “I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received....”

¹³ As the book of Proverbs says, “Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.”¹⁴

-One of the primary functions the Church exists to fulfill is to be the custodian of God’s legacy to mankind, preserving, expounding, teaching, and fostering the record of what God has revealed to us of His Will for us. Where else,

after all, could that Will be found, other than in the Body He left behind to be His agent in this world? Thus as Our Lord Himself said, “Blessed ... are those who hear the word of god and keep it!”¹⁵

Conclusion:

This need to conform ourselves to the Church’s teachings makes it especially important that, to preserve our sense of the individuality and the importance of Sin, we submit ourselves only to responsible, reliable authorities. Otherwise, as St. Peter wrote, “[F]alse prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.”¹⁶

Therefore, if we keep always before us that Sin is the misuse of our own personal Wills and, if persisted in, will separate us from God,¹⁷ and if we follow the pattern of the sound words which we have heard from the Apostles, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus,¹⁸ then, with St. Paul, “[W]e also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received our reconciliation.”¹⁹

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister²⁰

June 6, 2010.

1 *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxvi (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

2 Genesis 3: 1-24 (KJV).

3 Romans 5: 1-21 (KJV).

4 Romans 5: 11b-12 (RSV).

5 MASSEY H. SHEPHERD, JR., THE WORSHIP OF THE CHURCH 32 (Seabury Press 1952).

6 Deuteronomy 31: 16-17a (RSV). *Cf.* Amos 3: 3.

7 Micah 3: 4 (RSV).

8 Romans 5: 12b (RSV).

9 James 1: 14-15 (RSV); *cf.* II Chronicles 12: 14.

10 James 1: 14a (RSV).

11 Hebrews 1: 1-2 (RSV).

12 Romans 16: 26.

13 I Corinthians 15: 3 (RSV).

14 Proverbs 30: 5 (RSV); *cf.* St. Matthew 7: 24-25.

15 St. Luke 11: 28 (RSV).

16 II Peter 2: 1 (RSV).

17 *Cf.* I Timothy 6: 3-4.

18 II Timothy 1: 13 (RSV).

19 Romans 5: 11b (RSV).

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