



Sin is in the air

Fr Kevin Bates' weekly reflection for Oct 10-11, 2020

In this age of euphemisms, you don't hear sin being spoken about very much anymore. It's been replaced by softer terms, sometimes by psychological jargon which seem to excuse rather than name. It's similar to the use of the word "passed" when referring to death. We seem squeamish about embracing the truth of things.

It's clear that sin has always and always will be part of the human experience. What sin is however is sometimes less than clear. The Catechism definition that I grew up with goes: *"Sin is any wilful thought, word, deed or omission against the law of God."*

This is true to a point but falls short in one important respect. Sin is much more than the breaking of a law. It is fundamentally the fracturing of a relationship, with ourselves, each other and with God. Any law is meant to safeguard these relationships, and while sin may well involve the breaking of a law, it involves first of all the damaging of some of our primary relationships. It is connections that are damaged rather than rules that are broken. When we equate sin with the breaking of rules, we run the risk of unfairly judging people who appear to be "living in sin" for whatever reason, when in fact no relationship has been tarnished.

Where might we look in order to see sin in action? Well, one starting place could be for us to look in the mirror! An honest look at our own heart will reveal our judgemental self, our unresolved angers, fears, prejudices and blind spots. Here we may encounter our unwillingness to make a difference to the world around us because we are so caught up in our own small life.

More broadly, we can see the result of human sinfulness in the increasing gap between the wealthy and the poor. Here we encounter the lack of freedom, adequate healthcare and education in so many societies. We see the impact of climate change, much of it caused by our own behaviours, personally and as communities.

The greed of large companies surfaces from time to time. Rio Tinto's reckless destruction of historic aboriginal sites earlier this year brought a strong rebuke from shareholders and a change of policy, albeit too late for the places destroyed. We could hope that BHP's shareholders respond the same way as their company seems intent on further exploitation without regard to cultural sensitivities. The sin of corporate greed is often on display and too often goes unchallenged as our desire for dividends clouds our view of massive injustice.

The increasingly fragile nature of the environment is in large measure the result of our own carefree use of resources and garbage disposal practices. For such sins our children will pay a heavy price along with our neighbours in many developing countries.

The school-yard spat that passed for a Presidential debate in the US last week is further evidence of our divided world, our fear of each other which turns to anger and rejection and our inability to negotiate our differences reasonably and justly. For all these sins we share responsibility.

We can so easily be seduced into thinking that our sin is private and individual. St Paul points out more than once that even the most secret of our actions and attitudes, has its effect on others. Likewise we can focus on one form of sinfulness, such as sexual and other individual sins and think no further.

Jesus gave attention not so much to such matters but more to self-righteousness, hypocrisy, abuse, deception, injustice and exploitation. It was those who made burdens for others who were the target of his moral teachings and parables. The "plank in our own eye" could be worth visiting so that we deepen our understanding of human sinfulness and play our part then in the releasing of God's grace. Sin is in the air, but thankfully, so is grace. It's up to us to set it free.