CCC. 3rd after Trinity Year 3 *[Sam. 11.26 -12.10,13-15, Gal. 2.15-21, Luke 7.36 - 8.3]*

There’s a lot of concern with sin in today’s readings; sin and forgiveness and maybe, if we consider Simon the Pharisee as well as the sinful woman, unforgiven sin. So the line of least resistance today would be to offer you a reflection about our personal sins, our lack of love, and our need for forgiveness.

But you have heard plenty of those; and we can take the conclusions as read. So given the state of the world around us and the troubles afflicting our own country, I’m going to look at sin, or perhaps even evil, another way.

It’s called “structural sin” or “sin in the structures”. Can companies sin? Can institutions sin? Can nations? Can county councils? Can churches? You bet they can. And do. All the time. Just look around you.

In this country the media these past weeks have been full of such reports – you’ll all know the ones I mean - and the individuals made answerable surely only represent a much wider malaise. Then in a UK television programme last week, “Deep Cut, the Army’s Shame”, the abusive, suicide-inducing culture of a particular army unit was exposed. “Is it the only one such?” one has to ask. And how can all this be changed?

On the wider political scene, the UK BREXIT enthusiasts are expressing the selfish isolationism, the fearfulness and the hardness of heart that make up “xenophobia”, while across the Atlantic, the same is even more worryingly true of the Trump campaign and its supporters. Not *national* sinfulness as such, just yet, but certainly a group evil threatening to infect the whole body politic – just as the whole of Europe, in the face of the floods of refugees from Syria, is being pushed into meanness and self-protection and refusal of shelter that must be against God’s will.

Our minds don’t have to wander far to come up with the self-aggrandising cries of Deutchland Uber Alles, Rule Britannia, and even God Bless America, and the implied “Down with everyone else”.

Thinking about all this over the past week, prompted by an article in the current *SEARCH,* I’ve been reading the work of the American theologian Walter Wink – his writing on the strange subject of the “principalities and powers” which St Paul saw threatening the well-being of his time – and of Christians in particular.

I have to admit I had always thought of the “principalities and powers” as merely fanciful Early Church imagery denoting all the things Christians found difficult and challenging beyond measure in their day – Roman officialdom, pagan ceremonial, Jewish intransigence, foreign ideologies. Well, that may be partly true, but it is much more than that. What Wink points out is that if we believe that we live in a world composed of both matter and spirit, then not only individuals but also institutions, nations, groups of all kinds, have an inner invisible spirit as well as an outer physical form. And it is when we do not recognize the underlying spirit, what we might nowadays call the “culture” of a group entity, that it gives us most trouble. (The same is true, of course, of individuals, which is precisely why we are called to self-examination and all that should follow.)

To go on, the spirit of a corporate entity, be it bank, church, army unit or political party, may be: pretty good, sliding into trouble, dangerously corrupt, or positively infected with evil and infecting all it touches. The good news is that the spirits of structures can change and can be redeemed, as can individuals. The bad news is that this is difficult.

First, as Walter Wink puts it, “the powers must be unmasked”. A searching diagnosis must be made of the spiritual state of the entity that concerns us; and sometimes it will be found that the structure has become its own “summum bonum”, the ultimate good to be desired, served and prioritized above all else. Narcissism, greed, fear, and idolatry have taken hold and opened the door to what is directly opposed to God’s will. The way back from here is a hard one – and it will be a case of “all hands to the pumps” to use a nautical image.

Individual sinners, be they kings or unfortunate women, can be challenged, can repent, can restore the love of God to the centre of their lives, and be forgiven. But the same forgiven sinners – (which is all of us) – live not only as individuals but as part of social groups – our place of work, our neighbourhood, our church, maybe our political party or the pressure groups or charities we support. Enmeshed in our group ethos, we may come across principles or practices that alarm us, that threaten to ensnare us. It is crucial that we resist.

This is where “unmasking the powers” comes in. Jesus did it with regard to the Pharisees, pointing to their rigid legalism, their spiritual pride, their lack of charity, their narcissistic conviction of their own superiority. Self-deceiving “blind guides”, he called them, more in sorrow than in anger.

In all our work or social situations, now as then, we can find ourselves somehow enmeshed and implicated in attitudes, practices or policies we would not embrace as individuals. There is a particular sort of temptation, an evil voice, prone to speak to us in certain circumstances. Is the office full of gossip? *Join in then, or become its victim.* Is the business financially challenged? *Then you’ll have to connive at some sharp practice and fudging, or face losing your job.*  Were you told to let all that poison out into the atmosphere, just up wind of a housing estate? *Well do it if you don’t want to be fired.* Did some one in your church interfere with a child? *Don’t let* ***that*** *come out, or your congregation and your funds will disappear.*

Whether we think of that voice as an evil spirit or as “accommodation to the interests of the group”, as Christians and as conscientious members of the human race, we have to challenge it and stand out against it. We might even have to blow a whistle!

The trouble is that once one is part of an established group of any kind, the expectation is that one will show loyalty to the group. This sounds reasonable at first, but there must be limits to that loyalty.

Unconditional loyalty quickly morphs into idolatry. As Jesus told us, we cannot worship God and Mammon – or by inference God and our own convenience, or God and our own self-image, our pride. It’s either or. So we have to step away from the idolatry of group flourishing, however normal it may appear, and be willing to accept the consequences.

Doing that is not easy. Hence the respect we owe to the principled and brave individuals we now call “whistle-blowers”. We also owe them our support, not just by publicly standing up for them, but by joining in the process of diagnosis, which means prayerful discernment in our own organization of what is amiss, often best done in a group, before proceeding to challenge and then openly share the problem we have found.

I wonder what body it is that you belong to which most needs your attention in this way. Perhaps the answer will come to you in the course of our worship this morning . . .

Because only by unmasking and challenging the unseen “powers” in this way can we (to quote today’s collect) benefit from God’s “overcoming the tyranny of sin” through the spirit of Christ in our hearts, dedicating our freedom to his service so as to enjoy “the glorious liberty of the children of God”. Otherwise, we will remain prisoners.

**Diagnosing the sickness** can be difficult because it is often so hard to fathom what is wrong. “People of the lie” is one name that has been given to those deeply in the grip of evil. Lies abound and lies confuse us, but eventually lies must give way to the light and be exposed. But much prayer and patience is required before we get there.

**Standing up for** **what is right** is dangerous because it can so easily lead to conflict and personal damage all round. Indeed it led Jesus to the cross. Not only did he challenge the dogmatism of the Temple priests and the Pharisees, he constantly showed his acceptance and his loving care for outcasts, those publicly written off by the Pharisees as unclean - like the unfortunate woman in today’s Gospel reading. But if we are true Christians, true followers of Christ, this is what we are called to do - stand up for what is right, loving our neighbour, and also our enemy, and cherishing them as ourselves.

**Insisting on** **what is right** and exposing what is wrong will likely be ineffective if it is done hastily, in anger or exasperation, and without the love of what opposes us that Jesus demands. Only by loving those caught in the trap of evil, only by accepting and healing the shadow in ourselves, can we hope to make the unlovely lovable and bring what is dark into the light. It takes empathy and the will to understand, it takes loving prayer, patience and gentle discourse. It takes awareness of the false solutions that pride and laziness and fear threaten to lead us into. It takes all manner of qualities that are hard to find in our busy and self-absorbed lives.

Yet find them we must if our world, God’s world, is to be healed and the evil that threatens us all be overcome. May God bless you in your search and your witness to the truth, that with the woman who washed Jesus’ feet with her tears, we may go on in peace. Amen.

*Canon Ginnie Kennerley. 12.6.2016.*