

SERMON: Sunday – 1 May 2022 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Grace Wins

John 21:1-19

From last Sunday, we were perhaps left with the question as to whether it's right to forgive or not to forgive? Remember the Risen Jesus appeared to the disciples, breathed on them and sent them out with the authority to forgive sins or not to forgive sins. I said it would be up to them.

Perhaps I needed to say a little bit more about that. Perhaps, in seeking an answer to the dilemma, to forgive or not to forgive, we might ask ourselves the question, what would Jesus do?

It seems from the Scriptures that the answer to that is that Jesus seems to always choose to forgive.

Among his last words whilst dying on the cross were words of prayer, Father, forgive (these criminals), for they know not what they do. Even when it's tough to forgive, we can ask God, our Father, to do so.

We see from today's readings that Peter and Paul, were both recipients of God's forgiving love. As are we.

(SLIDE)

As Debbie Thomas puts it, "Peter's shame meets Jesus's grace, and Jesus's grace wins. That's the Gospel story in a nutshell".

It seems an odd thing for Peter to have done. There he is, in the boat, when suddenly he sees Jesus on the shore, realises it's him, and rather than strip off to enter the water he covers himself up.

Verse 7, "he wrapped his outer garment around him and jumped into the water".

Why?

Some have suggested that it was because Peter was ashamed. Ashamed of having denied Jesus. Ashamed of having run away when the heat was on. Ashamed at not having more faith. Ashamed at not having shown the love he might have.

Shame can eat away at people.

We've thought before about the difference between shame and guilt.

(SLIDE)

Writer and research professor Brené Brown describes the difference as, "shame is a focus on self, guilt is a focus on behaviour. Shame says "I am bad." Guilt says "I did something bad."

When we do something wrong there's only one way to sort it. And that is to say sorry. In religious terms, it's to confess our wrong and wait to be absolved.

We might still be ashamed of what we've said or done or not said or not done but in healthy relationships, shame is usually acknowledged and then spoken out, dealt with so that it doesn't linger longer than is healthy.

Brene Brown claims that "shame cannot survive being spoken"; meaning that shame cannot survive the living Word and when shame encounters the God who is Love, it burns to ash and scatters.

It's so important then to be able in a relationship to say aloud (or in prayer to God if that's not possible) "I'm sorry. I made a mistake" rather than "I'm sorry. I am a mistake". To say the latter leaves people bound in a state of shame.

But we know it's not easy to acknowledge mistakes because it leaves us vulnerable. But this is the point according to Brene Brown because "vulnerability is the way back".

In plunging into the water to run towards the Risen Jesus, Peter was making himself vulnerable, open to ridicule. Here he was saying, "I'm sorry. I made a mistake. Will you let me try again?". To which Jesus says, Peter, do you love me?

But its not just about messing up and making mistakes. That's not the only reason people can feel low.

I was listening to a programme this week about suicide prevention - suicide being the biggest killer of under 35s in the UK - and they had several people on the show speaking about the importance of talking therapy, not that they used that term. You may have heard of the 3 dads who'd each lost a teenage daughter to suicide and who set up Papyrus, a charity aiming to prevent suicide among young people.

One of the participants underlined the importance of using the right kind of language which might even be as simple as asking, "how are you feeling?" They were talking not just about suicide but about any sort of low

mood or depression to which can affect anyone.

(SLIDE)

Paul said, We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. And we wait for it, hoping, and with patience. Romans 8:22

Words of the same Paul who in a former life had persecuted the followers of Jesus but who is picked out by God as God's "chosen instrument" to proclaim God's name (15), to speak out God's name, to model God's name, to preach "that Jesus is the Son of God" (20).

How God of God to take that which curses and use it to bless. How transformative to take the instruments of death and turn them into life.

The latest suicide prevention programme rollout this week has the slogan, "to save a life" implying that you have it in you to save life.

How true that is for those who see the Risen Christ in everything. Christ is everywhere, and love will make us whole. So let's go, as Peter and Paul did, and follow the Risen Christ.