



## how's your sinning these days?

If it's not a little forward of me, I wonder how your sinning is these days? This is not asked in the style of a thundering preacher whose disapproval, condemnation even, is ready to pounce. It's an enquiry, kindly made, and meant.

How *is* your sinning these days?

I find mine less pronounced in some areas, more or less unchanged in others, and displaying an inflationary tendency in yet others.

It is St Paul who set me on this line of enquiry, in the reading we have heard from his Letter to the Galatians.

In recent weeks I have had a number of conversations which have planted themselves in my thoughts and have unpacked their bags and stayed a while. That is not unusual. It is part of what I understand to be the work of a priest, and more importantly the work of being human, too. There's no professional appropriation in these matters.

I know that many people don't or can't do it – this being mindful of another's life and their predicaments and respectfully, tenderly even, remembering it, holding on to it, keeping it in one's pocket.

Some are so overwhelmed by adversity or by internal noise that it's impossible for them to practice this. Others are dealing with their own fear or anxiety, and those things simply leave no room for it. Others are deep in a pit of depression (those who have experienced that will understand; those who haven't, won't). In moments like that, we haven't always the energy to be attentive to others' needs in this way.

A few of you will know that I can on occasion be a disobliging intercessor. I decline to pray for specific outcomes. I never badger God with requests that X passes their exams or lands a specific job, or that a miraculous healing might occur in the face of a reasonably reliably expected outcome.

All this is because I do not think that God micro-manages the universe.

And it is also to save me from the unimaginable problems were I to think that God intervenes *here* but not *there*; that God, in the face of 'unusually high caller demand' as so many telephone helplines like to say, decides to intervene based on the numbers of prayers being made. We can trivialise God pretty easily, just as we can trivialise other people, and ourselves.

This gets us into the nature and purpose of prayer. That is not today's subject, though I do want to suggest that allowing some matters to take up residence in, let's say metaphorically, our *hearts* - not to dominate or burden our daily business but to become a thoughtful part of it - is as best a form of prayer as I have come across.

The purpose of that digression was to say that the people and conversations I have been mindful of have made me think again about *human experience*, and how supremely precious and instructive it can be. I'd like to try and say something about that.

Unless you are very new to church life you'll know that the ecclesiastical year is pretty crowded with feast days, saints' days and seasons. Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter are the biggies.

And when we're not in such seasons, we are in what the Church calls *Ordinary Time*. We're in it now. Whenever I see it mentioned I chuckle. It always makes me smile. It does this because for those who dare to live as though the claims of the Gospels are true *there can never be any ordinary time: all time is extra-ordinary*.

I'd like to persuade you that the same is true of human experience. However ordinary it may seem it is the material that shapes us and through which we discover life's meaning. And it's *your* experience that does this for you: not mine, not the reported experiences of royalty or celebrity; not even that recounted in the world's best literature.

*In that sense, your experience is a sacrament.*

But it is not plain sailing. Far from it. And the big issue is how we interpret our experience. How do we read it? Our interpretation is clouded by many factors. And so part of life's adventure is the duty to try to clean up our perceptions, to remove as far as we can things that distort them, so that we read, learn from, interpret our experiences with as much clarity as possible.

We're only likely to progress in this if we want to; some people seem not to want to. But assuming we do, I doubt there is any straight forward method; but here are some of the ingredients that seem to help.

A certain kind of scepticism, by which is meant a questioning approach.

Friends of a certain quality and depth (never available to order and frankly pretty rare, but one of life's greatest gifts, always to be cherished).

Love – of course – from whatever source (the real thing, mind; not the imposters which we're inevitably going to fall for before we can gain a bit of insight).

And here's an unwelcome one: suffering. It is inescapable, and after leaving us bruised and seemingly shipwrecked may teach us far more than we ever expected, so that our perceptions become clearer.

Think of yourself as a mystery. Also as a project. A work in progress. A person slowly learning (if you want to) what it is to be human, loved by God; created with a purpose; in need of intimacy and of mercy; able to make an impact for good or ill.

Paul seems to be saying something along these lines in his Letter to the Galatians. He speaks of our freedom: *For freedom Christ has set you free*. Don't slip back, he says, do not again accept the yoke of slavery. False perceptions are a form of slavery.

Paul's contrasting use of spirit and flesh can be troublesome, even misleading. It may well have contributed, culturally, to the negative attitudes we may have to our bodies. Here he is contrasting what we might more usefully call our lower and higher natures.

He reels off an impressive list of sins (hence my asking you about the state of your sinning these days). Here is his list: "Fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these." 'Tick as appropriate' as they say.

It's a pretty serious Charge Sheet. It reminds me of Oliver Wendell Holmes' verse:

*God's plan made a hopeful beginning.  
But man spoiled his chances by sinning.  
We trust that the story  
Will end in God's glory,  
But at present the other side's winning.*

Is the other side winning? It can look that way.

And yet. And yet. Paul does not abandon us to despair in all this. Nor should we despair when we're sometimes disheartened by the ambivalence and conflicts of our minds and

hearts. How is it that we can feel so loving one moment, so mean the next? Or so ready to practice idolatry, to stir enmities, to feel jealousy, to feed anger, to provoke quarrels?

*The first step is always to bring such conflicts within our hearts into the light.* Invite them for tea. Address them by name. Befriend them.

Our human experience is precious for the reasons mentioned. It can teach. It can transform. Through it we can move beyond the desire to consume and control; through it we may discover the redemptive, healing business of love; through it we may yet gain wisdom. It requires only that we take our experiences seriously, and in reading them, seek God's grace and presence.

The word sin derives from the idea of 'being in error, missing the mark'. If this were archery alone, we could simply practice and improve our technique. But Paul isn't talking about archery but about our relationship with God in and

through the person of Christ, and our relationship with ourselves and with one another.

Tend your higher self he says; feed your better self. Live in the power of God's Spirit. In his letter he says "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control". And he reminds them – and us – that the whole business is summed up in a single imperative: *You shall love your neighbour as yourself.*

Let me say again: Think of yourself as a mystery. Also as a project. A work in progress. A person slowly learning (if you want to) what it is to be human, loved by God; created with a purpose; in need of intimacy and of mercy; able to make an impact for good or ill.

Treasure your experiences, even the difficult ones. They are our greatest teachers.

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