



Week 2: Jesus the Lord, Forgiving Sins

Scripture References

Jesus is the eternal Word and Image of God made flesh (John 1.14; Colossians 1.15). Through him the Father creates everything (1 Corinthians 8.6; Colossians 1.16) and saves the world from sin. As the Word-Incarnate, Jesus shows his command over nature (Matthew 14.28-33) and even over life and death (Mark 5.21-43). He bears our sicknesses and carries our infirmities (Isaiah 53.4; Matthew 8.17). Jesus is the divine-human doctor who cures all ills, bodily and spiritual, and feeds us with his very life, to heal us from sin and death (Matthew 15.21; John 4.46-54; John 6.51-59).

From the Book of Common Prayer

A General Confession (from Morning and Evening Prayer)

ALMIGHTY and most merciful Father, We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep, We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts, We have offended against thy holy laws, We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, And we have done those things which we ought not to have done, And there is no health in us: But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us miserable offenders; Spare thou them, O God, which confess their faults, Restore thou them that are penitent, According to thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesu our Lord: And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, That we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, To the glory of thy holy Name.

Amen.

Comment on BCP Prayers

The General Confession teaches us to declare honestly before God the evil we have done and the good we have failed to do. But it also teaches us to cast ourselves on the Father's mercy, like the prodigal son (Luke 15.11-32). **Honest confession of sin and a real resolve to amend one's life are an essential part of Christian conversion** and the ongoing work of sanctification (i.e., being made holy by God's grace).

Reflection, by Revd. Arwen Folkes

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You may have noticed a tendency among some people, when talking about their illness, to downplay their symptoms. It can cause all sorts of problems because minimising or neglecting to give all details to a doctor or nurse can lead to treatment that is only partially effective or partially informed.

The full benefit of any treatment is frustrated because not all symptoms have been brought to light and the process of healing and recovery is lengthened and made far more complicated. This analogy of illness is a helpful one when considering what it means to reflect on 'Jesus the Lord, forgiving sins' because the human condition of sinfulness is a spiritual sickness, a sickness which we all, without exception, struggle with to various degrees throughout our lives.

When we come before our Lord, whether privately or corporately to confess, we can often try to downplay our symptoms before Him and inevitably find ourselves not knowing the full benefit of the forgiving grace we have been given in Him.

I have been rather interested, for a long time, in the experience of prisoners who come to faith during or after their incarceration. 'Into the Silent Land' by Martin Laird OSA describes the experience of one young prisoner, who having entered into communion with God through the practice of silent prayer, found deep within himself 'something of value for the very first time' in his life. Having had the diagnosis of his sinfulness confirmed in full fact by his imprisonment, his heart was able to open up to the full treatment that divine forgiveness brings - worth, value, and restorative love.

I too have had the profound privilege of quietly baptising an adult after they had had a difficult life. In that baptism those words, that can often make others feel awkward, were laden with real meaning and transformative power - turning away from sin, rejecting evil, receiving forgiveness, being clothed in Christ. Each one resonated around the church, punching both the air and the heart.

The General Confession in the Book of Common Prayer is a beautiful and weighty prayer. But it can trouble people, especially those who spend their time downplaying their symptoms.

Yet, it reads very differently when we have acknowledged the full and complicated difficulty of living under the sin that corrupts the whole of our world. Under this light it reads more like a statement of fact rather than a damning indictment. We do err and stray like lost sheep, we do engage in daily battle with the devices and desires of our own hearts, and we do indeed leave undone many things and do things we ought not to have done. It acknowledges the truth that when our lives are held up against the greatest commandment, love of God and love of neighbour, our spiritual health is rightly and humbly called into question.

Mature Christianity consciously accepts that we labour under these things (as opposed to the chaos of struggling with them unconsciously) and this awareness is the cross that we are called to bear in our Christian life. Acknowledging our sins entails not so much writing a scrupulous list of every single misdemeanour, but acknowledging the great, cross-shaped, shadow of sin throughout our lives.

Yet, knowing that we bear such a Cross is not where the Christian life leaves us. Having fully diagnosed and named the real state of things, the full prescription and treatment for healing is promised to us. And what hope there is in this!

I feel compelled to share a personal lightbulb moment in my own faith that completely changed my understanding of everything. When exploring the idea of 'atonement' (which can be helpfully broken into 'at-one-ment'), I was made aware of a subtle but transformative difference between two different theories, whose technical names are 'propitiation' and 'expiation'. One of the traditional and classical understandings of atonement in western Christianity has been dominated by the idea of 'propitiation' - the idea that God paid for our sins upon the cross because our transgressions were so awful, and God so mad with love, that he gave up his own son as the ransom for our liberation.

However, there is another understanding, which is perhaps more liberating - that of 'expiation' which suggests a deeper rescue operation. Under this theory, God saw the full extent of the sinful state that we labour under and was so moved by the difficulty and problem of this that he sent his son as an 'expiation'; a divine rescue mission to make amends.

He came not to condemn us (John 3.17) but to rescue us and help us through it, to let us know that he reclaims all that he has created - the good, the bad, and the ugly.

This second understanding is truly revolutionary - it still acknowledges that we labour under our sinfulness, but that a merciful and loving God is so moved by our condition that he sends the finest possible physician to our aid - his own beloved Son. To return to my opening analogy, it is as if the patient has laid bare their symptoms and the very finest surgeon with the best medicine is given in response.

Which brings us to the second half of the General Confession in the Book of Common Prayer. Having laid out the full difficulties of the condition, we are then enabled to be open to the best treatment there possibly can be, from the hands of a loving Father who seeks to treat and heal us in the very finest way.

He has mercy upon us, spares us, restores us – and we beseech him to fulfil the promises made to us in Christ Jesus our Lord. God empowers us by his grace, helping us live the 'Godly, righteous and sober life' that we all want to live but struggle daily to do so.

Reflection on this week's image

Christ gazes at us from the cross, challenging our sin but revealing God's forgiveness: how can I so receive his gaze that forgiveness may flow through me and transform my relationships with others?

Questions for Discussion

- Thinking of the 'at-one-ment' as a divine rescue mission, can you bring to mind a time in your life where you have been involved in, or have witnessed, a rescue mission by God?
- What is there in your life that is 'left undone' that you can bring to the Lord, for whom nothing is impossible?
- Why do you think we struggle to accept the paradox of our honest humility being met with God's divine love?
- Consider the bold certainty of 'Thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesus our Lord'. How does this confidence bear fruit in our own lives or church community?