Sermon for Matins, Trinity 18 *Mother Emma*

*Readings: Proverbs 3:1-18, 1 John 3:1-15*

Those of you who were here last Sunday may feel, as I did, on hearing today’s reading from Proverbs, that it bore a strong resemblance to last Sunday’s Old Testament reading. Indeed, the writer has continued with the theme of humility and of obedience to God’s law, of which I spoke last week.

Our Epistle reading touches on similar themes: we must not transgress the law, and our love of God must be reflected in the righteousness of our conduct towards one another, our love of one another and our rejection of sin.

St John is wrestling with a problem common to many of the early Christians – they were convinced that in the Crucifixion and Resurrection they had witnessed Jesus’ final victory over sin, and yet they were mystified to find that even amongst their brothers and sisters who professed Christ, sinful behaviour continued.

Today, perhaps, we wrestle with a different issue – that the word “sin” is hardly ever mentioned, even in church.

One fascinating book which I have much enjoyed on this subject, however, is entitled “The Dark Side of the Soul – an insider’s guide to the web of sin!” The author is a well-known theologian with special interests in Jesus’ teachings on humility and forgiveness -the very themes discussed in our readings - and what these mean for modern society. In this book, however, he considers the other side of the coin – the sins which separate us from God and from one another, and which, in contrast to the virtues of humility and forgiveness, tempt us to raise ourselves, our status, our own concerns and choices and our personal feelings above our trust in and commitment to God himself.

The word “sin” has these days changed its meaning so radically that we would scarcely recognise the emotions it provoked in members of the early Church, or indeed of Christians right up until the middle of the last century. “Sinful” today generally means something rather enjoyable, in a naughty kind of way – a creamy cupcake perhaps, or a quick drink before the sun is over the yardarm. Ice-creams and chocolates have been marketed under the name of “the Seven Deadly Sins”, and most people might say that in contrast with the word “evil”, “sin” no longer produces a shiver of fear or of disgust.

Perhaps this is due to the over-using of a hierarchy of sins by the Church over the centuries, to instruct and to condemn - people have naturally rebelled in the current age of mistrust of authoritarian pronouncements, and feel they need to show that we have broken free from such proscriptive teaching.

But the history of the Seven Deadly Sins shows that, as so often, something which began as a wonderful opportunity for self-examination became a tool for beating others.

A list of different sins or temptations which might assail the human spirit, and for which humanity should remain constantly alert and watchful, was originally developed amongst the Early Church monks, hermits and desert-dwellers, who spent their lives seeking to achieve purity and holiness. Their starting-point was that every single one of us is at risk from these sins, and indeed, carries the seed of them deep in our being, and we must always be wary of their potential power over us.

Although we may all think we know what the Seven Deadly Sins were (especially if we enjoy Magnum ice-cream), in fact the list changed considerably over the first millennium of Christian history, with different vices included, and different categories and priorities given to those which remained consistently on the list.

One which has today fallen by the wayside is the sin of “vainglory”, the sin which encourages us to do things (even good things) for the wrong reasons – in the hope of recognition or admiration. In a society where we are encouraged to develop ever-greater self-confidence and self-assertiveness, to sell ourselves better and to strive for greater celebrity and recognition, the sin of vainglory is not only a word in our vocabulary, but a concept in our thinking which seems no longer to have a recognisable place.

One sin which has appeared consistently in every list, and which for many, was the most serious, and even the root of all other sins, is the sin of pride. The book defines it: “Pride is wrong because it is a failure to recognise that God is God.” It is to forget that we are God’s creatures and that honour, worship and obedience are due only to him.

The idea that pride underlies all other sins is an intriguing one. Put another way, it is easy to see that the failings we might all admit to in ourselves, in our moments of real honesty – traces of vanity, vainglory, prejudice, snobbery, anger, greed, lust or malicious gossip – could stem from a hidden, underlying sense that we are, in some way, better than someone else, and therefore in some way entitled to more.

It is harsh and shocking to think of ourselves in this way; clearly it is always easier to see such failings in others, and they may be mild and subtle, but in every human being there lies the capacity to look down on or criticise another.

Our reading from Proverbs urged us. “Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the Lord and depart from evil.”

There is no place for pride amongst human beings, which allows us to see ourselves as superior, at the cost of others. And St John pronounces sharply: “Whosoever abideth in God sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him.”

If we recognise the sole sovereignty of God, and of the equality of every human being as one of his creatures, committing ourselves to obedience of one and love of the other, we could be freed from the pride which leads to all other manifestations of sin.

Perhaps we too should even search our lives and our hearts for signs of the sin of pride, by asking ourselves repeatedly, “Do **we** still recognise that God is God?”

Amen