

Really Unworthy!

I remember many years ago, when I was a curate, talking to a woman about why she did not come to church. Her reason was that she was not good enough. I tried to explain that if she was good enough, she would not need to go! Our pasts can hold us back - they make us feel unworthy.

We do bad things. I would say that that is a universal truth for humanity. Sometimes our badness is stupidity, thoughtlessness; sometimes it is just bad - and we don't even notice, or care. The next two sessions will look at these two - the bad and the stupid, and see how God reacts to them.

This week we will be looking at the bad, the things that we have done that really are bad. Of course, we might not think that our 'badness' is that bad; other people do the really bad things. But sin is sin - it stops us being what we ought to be.

Our word 'sin' translates the Greek word '*amartia*' which, in turn, originates in archery. It means missing the centre, being off course - not missing the target completely but missing the point that we should be hitting!

Finding bad people in the scriptures is like shooting the proverbial fish in a barrel; the problem is, where to start. By 'bad people' I don't mean the pantomime, total villain, hissing type bad person - such as Pharaoh, Ahab, Jezebel, or Herod (take your pick as to which Herod!).¹ I mean the people that we normally think of as being heroes of the faith; great ancestors; people to look up to. It's only on close inspection that we find that they are not quite as perfect as all that! Noah gets drunk and has sex with his daughters; Abraham is willing to let others sleep with his wife to avoid trouble; Jacob tricks his father and steals from his brother; Joseph really is a self-centred ****, and probably deserves everything he gets! Solomon goes after other gods - and bankrupts the nation. The list goes on and on - and we haven't even reached the New Testament. These people are real; warts and all. But they are used by God, chosen by God, despite their glaring faults - once those faults have been sorted out!

So much choice. But, we will focus on just two, and see if they can be of any help to us.

God's Poster Boy

David really is the Wonder Boy of the Old Testament. We first meet him as a young, rugged shepherd fighting off lions, wolves, bears and other assorted wildlife. In 1 Sam 16:12 we hear his description "Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome." He kills Goliath with a mere sling; he plays the harp and sings like an angel. When he is eventually forced to flee from the mad king, who jealous of

¹ Have you ever noticed how even in the Bible none of these characters are quite cardboard cut-outs of evil? They all sum to have another side, which sometimes peaks through in the story? Maybe there is hope for everyone.

his success, he makes sure that the king is never hurt - even when he has the chance to kill him (1 Sam 24). The people loved him; the girls loved him (1 Sam 18:7). And, at last he becomes king. Truly the stuff of Hollywood; one can almost imagine his perfectly white teeth glinting!

But, as with so many other characters, David has severe flaws. It's almost as though he is just too perfect, or thinks that he is too perfect. Power, popularity, adoration - it all gets to him, and he starts thinking that he is above everyone else; that the rules don't apply to him.

Read 2 Samuel 11 - 12:15

This story really is the story of a fall from grace. It has so many elements. David's lust for Bathsheba; his willingness to have Uriah killed (without getting his own hands dirty). But so much more. These people are entrusted to him by God; he is their shepherd, there to protect them. What he does destroys that trust.

Nathan's visit to David in chapter 12 is probably one of the most poignant scenes in scripture. When David hears the story of the rich man and the lamb, he is enraged; his early days as a shepherd, desperate to protect, boil out of him; his righteous anger is stirred against anyone who could do such a thing. One can only imagine his feeling when Nathan tells him that the story is about David. The realisation of complete and utter failure. The bursting of the bubble of righteousness.

So often we judge the faults of others without realising our own faults. We think others are not worthy, but do not consider whether we are much different.

This is a turning point for David. The Hollywood imagery and hype crumbles away from him; the power he has becomes a responsibility and a duty, not just a personal toy. But, he is not rejected by God; he is still the one chosen.

A Very Public Sinner!

Let's now leap forward to the New Testament, to that great story of little Zacchaeus in **Luke 19:1-10** - a favourite of Sunday Schools down the ages. As Luke tells us, Zacchaeus was a "chief tax-collector and was rich." Now, we all know that tax-collectors were not the most popular people at that time - indeed, paying taxes is not a great pastime today - but a bit more background is needed as to why Zacchaeus was a *bad* man.

The Romans, as occupiers, were hated by the Jews. That is simple. The Romans wanted to collect taxes (they wanted to get something out of occupying other countries!) They did not collect the taxes themselves but sold the right to collect to locals. This was a profitable business, as the Romans only took a percentage of what was collected; the tax-collectors could keep everything else. So, tax-collectors were seen as collaborators; they also basically stole from their fellow Jews, for profit. They were seen as anti-Jewish, therefore as anti-God. There was no way they could fulfil their religious duties as Jews. They were total outsiders in the eyes of men and in the eyes of God. Their one advantage was that they had a lot of money.

Zacchaeus knew all of this; he had chosen the path he was on. He knew that what he was doing was wrong, but he carried on. Until he met Jesus.

And that really is the great part to this story - he is accepted by Jesus without question, without comment. He is worthy to have the Son of God eat with him, despite all he has done, because he is a human being, in the image of God.

It's as though when Jesus looks at Zacchaeus, he sees something different to others - or, he can see beyond what others see. He sees through the greed, the cruelty, the fallen - even the loneliness; he sees what God created and what God declared 'very good'.

There seems to be something wrong here. Surely Jesus should have told Zacchaeus to repent first? Surely he would have to make amends to show how sorry he was? But, when Jesus speaks to him, there is not even a hint that Zacchaeus is sorry. That's important; we are acceptable even as we are. Of course, it does not end there. To encounter Jesus, to encounter the Living God, is to open oneself up to the possibility of change.

Zacchaeus is going to have a lot to do. He is going to have to try to restore that which he has taken; that will be hard. But much harder will be carrying on living among those who know him; those who know what he was - and those who think that a leopard cannot change its spots. But, by accepting the acceptance of Jesus, and knowing his own real worth - worth in the eyes of God, not Man - Zacchaeus is ready to live. "Today salvation has come to this house."

There are, of course, great differences between these stories, but there are also great similarities. Both men abuse their positions; both seem to have put God aside in order to get their own way. For both, there are grave consequences for what they have done.

But each of them has a moment of confrontation; a moment of being able to see themselves as God sees them. And, it seems, for both, when they can see like this, the desire for good outweighs the desire for bad. The bad, the sin, has held them back until the moment of repentance.

- Have you ever felt that something that you have done has held you back from your Christian journey?
- Does it matter if other people know what you've done, or if it's just between you and God?
- How does what you have done in the past affect how you judge others?
- What do you think of the Sacrament of Confession (Reconciliation)? Can it help?