



What are we doing at Evensong?

Confessing

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Isaiah 6: 1–8 James 5: 13–16

Some years ago, when we were rehearsing Evensong to go out on the BBC, I began the service, as the Prayer Book specifies it should, with a sentence from Scripture having to do with wickedness, sin, repentance, or judgment – to be followed, of course, by the confession. ‘I acknowledge my transgressions,’ I intoned, ‘and my sin is ever before me.’ ‘Cut, cut’, yelled the producer from the BBC. ‘Wouldn’t you like to begin the service with something more welcoming, friendly and positive?’ she asked – so I had another go. ‘Behold I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me’.

Ok – so I was being a bit awkward. I knew that the producer wanted me to say something lovely and warm like ‘welcome to Evensong from the beautiful and historic chapel of Trinity College, Cambridge, close to the banks of the picturesque river Cam’ – but, I’m not very good with lovely. What I should have said – had I been quick – was this: that in a world in which, courtesy of Facebook and Instagram and selfies and all that, we rather energetically practice a self-promotion which seems to leave many feeling anxious, insecure and fragile, perhaps there is something to be said for the radically different and altogether more honest practice of confession, with all that it entails. But I wasn’t that quick, I’m afraid.

Of course, the producer had a point. The confession we all said earlier this evening is a bit full on. It starts gently enough: ‘we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep’. There’s certainly no need to balk at that, since no one thinks of sheep as determinedly deviant or particularly vicious, just a bit clueless. And we are probably ok with the next charge, that ‘we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts’. We probably have. But now it gets a bit more serious. ‘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.’ We are ‘miserable offenders’. Steady on, you might say – it’s as if you went to the police station and they began by having you admit that you might, just the once, have done 33 miles an hour in a 30 miles per hour zone, only, before you know it, being coaxed into mentioning a touch of theft, a spot of arson and a couple of counts of grievous bodily harm.

So yes, confession can seem a bit much and I can see why the producer would have preferred something more cuddly – but as I say, I think there is quite a lot to be said for beginning with confession.

It is worth noticing of course that in the world in which Christianity grew up, confession was not an obvious opening gambit for addressing the gods. You really don't need any great familiarity with the Greek gods to know that confessing your sins to them wouldn't be an obvious thing to do. In the first place they have rather relaxed morals themselves, and in any case are inclined to view human action as amusing folly; certainly they take no very active interest in the detailed doings of mere mortals. The gods might need to be placated, appeased, flattered, implored, thanked if things have gone as you would wish – and insofar as you have ignored or overlooked their claims to lordship, you might just need to say sorry. But confession in the sense in which we are used to it – as a matter of reviewing your life in the light of the claims that God and goodness make upon you – that makes very little sense at all.

In Christianity it is otherwise – and the difference, and why it matters, is brought out for me by analogy with a moment in a novel by D.H. Lawrence, when a man and woman, a married couple who have been arguing on and off – but more on than off – for years and years, suddenly stop arguing. The husband is overjoyed. Finally, finally he thinks, we have found a way to get along. But no – his wife has stopped arguing with him because she has finally given up on him. You wouldn't confess to the Greek gods, because they really don't care – they merely chuckle in amusement at the follies of humankind. Confessing makes sense in Christianity just because God still argues with us, if I can put it like that, still claims us, still hopes for something from us.

But hold on a minute you might say – haven't we all just fessed up to being 'miserable offenders'. That doesn't sound too promising or hopeful.

Well, as they say, there is good news and there is bad news. Let's get the bad news out of the way first. The bad news is that we are indeed, as the Prayer Book sees it, miserable offenders.

The confession we say at the beginning of Evensong was written specially for the Prayer Book. Evensong itself – like Morning Prayer – is an adaption of much older services. And much of Evensong would therefore have been perfectly familiar to its new users. But the confession was brand new – the practice before the Reformation had been for an individual to go to a priest from time to time to confess their sins, to be given a penance and receive an absolution. And with this confession, the authors of the Prayer Book wanted to get across a particular view of sin.

Back in the old days you listed the sins you had committed since your last confession. They might have been small – you failed to return your shopping trolley to the trolley bay at the supermarket – they might have been great – you murdered a person you saw not returning their shopping trolley to the appropriate place (it can be quite annoying) – but either way, you were given penance and absolution and you walked away – and you may have walked away with the idea that these sins, enumerated one by one, were the issue. And in part they are – 'We have done those things we ought not to have done'. But it is not the deeper truth of the matter. The deep truth is that 'there is no health in us' and that these individual sins, these sins we can count one by one, are just the symptoms of an underlying illness. Imagine I go to the doctor with a temperature and a headache, and the doctor gives me paracetamol to bring my temperature down and to take away the headache – but overlooks the fact that I have malaria. Old style confession, so the authors of the prayer book thought, was a bit like that. Sins are like symptoms – they are signs of something deeper. Sins are what I do – but the real problem, the illness, is what I am. As Augustine would have said – the issue is not that we stumble from time to time, but that we only ever limp.

But there is a second point – the old practice may have encouraged the idea that sin is something each of does as an individual. I take my sins along to the priest, you take yours, and yet another person takes theirs. But importantly for those who wrote the prayer book, sin is not just something we do as individuals, but something we do as a group and so should be confessed collectively. Let me put it like this. Sin is not like holidays – we all go on holiday, but we don't all go on holiday together (though I am sure that could be fun), nor do you go on holiday because I do, or vice versa. But sin is very much a joint human venture. Sure my sins are my own but, as they say, they tend not be very original – for I have been schooled in ways of living which teach me to be selfish and suspicious and uncharitable; I am part of a crowd which encourages, expects and fosters certain behaviours; what I think, what I say, what I am inclined to believe, for all this I must take responsibility, but I didn't lick it up from the road as they say in Ireland. It didn't come from nowhere. I am schooled in sin, and we are all in the school, and all of us pupils and teachers at one and the same time. Sin is not just what I do, but what we do – sinners is what we are.

So there we have the bad news – according to this new confession, significantly to be said by the whole congregation together, the human problem is not the problem of occasional sins, but that we are sinners; the problem is not merely a few things we do wrong, but a crookedness of being in which we all share and conspire. The beautiful language of the confession tells a grim tale. Sin is not this act or that act, this deed or this misdeed – it is a state of being. Sinning is not a part time and occasional occupation, but a full time profession. And we are all in it together. We are a community of sinners.

So what about the good news?

Well – we have to attend to something so very obvious that we might easily overlook it. And that is that the authors of the Prayer Book and of this brand new confession placed it, and placed it deliberately, at the very beginning of the service. It could have gone anywhere, in principle – at beginning, middle or end – but they put it bang at the beginning, to tell us, of course that confession is our first word, but not the last. It is an opening gambit, not a final statement. It is where we start – but not where we are supposed to finish.

About 10 days ago I visited a Buddhist temple in Tokyo. A ceremonial pathway led from an outer gate towards the inner sanctuary – and as you approached the sanctuary there was a small fountain or well where you should wash your hands. Now I am no expert on Buddhism, but I am guessing that if you stood at the fountain rubbing your hands like Lady Macbeth, manically repeating the words 'out, out, damned spot', you have probably missed the point.

So too with owning up to being miserable offenders – this is not a last word, but only a first word. You are not meant to get stuck here. It is at the beginning because it is meant to be just that – a beginning – just as it was a beginning for Isaiah, but only a beginning, as we heard in our first lesson from the book of Isaiah.

Isaiah is granted a vision of God. And a very grand vision it is too. God is enthroned, like a magnificent eastern potentate, high and lifted up, overpoweringly filling the space of the throne room, and attended by an extraordinary and impressive honour guard of seraphim – six winged creatures, who cry out 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord. Heaven and earth are full of his glory' – and who cry out in such loud voices that the door posts shake and the very foundations of the building are unsettled. But it is not just the doors which shake, or the foundations which are unsettled – so is Isaiah himself. He is shaken to the core – so that rather than joining in the hymn of praise, all he can contribute is a cry of utter dejection – 'Woe is me, for I am lost, for I am man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips'. Woe, lost, unclean – he is a miserable offender.

But this is only a beginning. For Isaiah will discover that this truth – though it is a truth about him – does not determine his future, not because of anything he does, but because of something God does. His lips are touched by a live coal – and with it his sin is taken away. So that when the Lord asks that great question, ‘Whom shall I send, and who shall go for us?’ Isaiah does not make the answer you would expect from someone who is unclean, lost or undone, but instead makes that bold and audacious and fearless reply: ‘Here am I; send me’.

Evensong has us begin in the same place as Isaiah – but it wants us to end in the same place too. Evensong begins by having you admit that you are a miserable sinner – but that is not the end of the story it envisages for you. At the end you will go out – you will be sent out – with a blessing. Confession is a good place to start, but it not where you are meant to finish.

Bad news and good news. But the good news should not make us forget the bad news. We are to go out in the knowledge that we are forgiven, but without ever forgetting that we are forgiven sinners. Under the heading in the Prayer Book for the service Evening Prayer, you find the words ‘Daily Throughout the Year’. Now most consumers of the Book of Common Prayer probably didn’t go to church daily – but they probably did go weekly, and so they returned week by week to this confession. And they returned to confession week by week, not because confession is about wiping the slate clean until the next sin, but because it is about declaring together who we are in the here and now in the hope that we can live in the light of this self-understanding week by week and day by day.

So contrary to the view of the producer from the BBC, I think confession is a good way to begin, and it is a good thing to try to absorb the self-understanding it offers us. We must confess because of who we are – those who limp along as we try to live well; but we confess hopefully because of who God is – one who claims us and our lives notwithstanding their woefulness. So as the practice of confession becomes second nature to us, we can surely live in hope towards the future, honest and critical of our own lives, and because honest and critical in relation to our selves, perhaps just a little less critical in relation to the lives of others. There is another social world, of course, and I mentioned it at the beginning – the world of Facebook and Instagram and so on, where we must struggle to present ourselves as so much better than we are, and more importantly so much better than everyone else – and where the collateral damage of these competitive endeavours seems to be the increasing prevalence of fragile mental health. But as for me: ‘I acknowledge my transgressions and my sin is ever before me’ – and that’s actually a very good place for beginning.