

**SERMON PREACHED AT ST ANDREW'S WALKERVILLE ON SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 3,
2017 BY THE REVEREND STUART LANGSHAW, LOCUM TENENS.**

TENTH SERMON IN THE SERIES ABOUT HOLY COMMUNION

From time to time we all have to apologise. Maybe for something we have done or said, or for something we have failed to do. Apologising is a salutary experience. It causes us to realise that we are not perfect, and it causes us to realise that the relationship we have dented or damaged badly by our action is so valuable to us that we must do what we can to rectify it. From time to time we all have to be apologised-to. Something has been done to us or said to us that has hurt us ... the other person has realised this and offers us a sincere apology. We realise that the relationship we have with the other person is at risk; but it is not always a simple thing to accept an apology. We may be hurt so deeply that accepting the apology is difficult. We may have the kind of personality that enjoys being offended and enjoys toying with the person who has apologised. We may find it hard to use words or actions that communicate the message, "I accept your apology and I forgive you."

In our series of sermons about the Holy Communion Service, today we come to think about the Confession and Absolution. We come to think about apologising to God and receiving God's acceptance and forgiveness. The Confession & Absolution form an extraordinarily personal and subjective few minutes in our liturgy.

The old Book of Common Prayer's invitation to the Confession emphasised its personal nature and emphasised the conditions that worshippers have to fulfill as they come to apologise to God. The Book of Common Prayer has these words – you will remember them I'm sure – "Ye that do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins ... and in love and charity with your neighbours ... and intend to lead a new life ... following the commandments of God ... and walking from henceforth in his holy ways ... draw near with faith, and make your humble confession to almighty God, meekly kneeling upon your knees."

The words we use in the Confession in our service are a broad sweep – "We have sinned in thought, word and deed. In what we have failed to do. Not loved God with our whole heart. Not loved our neighbours as ourselves." Those general words of confession probably cover the particular concerns about our own lives as we come into God's presence. Our uncharitable thoughts. Our self-focused attitudes. Our careless and hurtful words. Our lack of attention to the welfare of others – including drivers or pedestrians. Our inattention to God's life in our lives. Maybe even some dramatic wrong that we may have done to another person or organisation. As we use the broad sweep of words in the Confession, our private thoughts go to the particular matters in our lives that we are aware that we have not played with a straight spiritual bat.

In an earlier sermon I've mentioned the immoral and illegal deed of King David and the beautiful Bath-Sheba and her husband Uriah. When you think about King David using the broad words of the Holy Communion confession, you can imagine how his private thoughts would have gone to his particular failings. "Sinned in thought and in deed." Indeed he had. "Not loved his neighbour as himself." Indeed he had not.

The Confession in our service is there for us to set our lives right in our own thoughts ... to set our lives right so that we may relate to others generously and lovingly ... to set our lives right

so that we may receive the Holy Communion in the full assurance that our lives and hearts have been cleansed by our Confession.

We have a wonderful promise in the Bible about God's attitude to our owning up to our shortcomings and sins ... about God's attitude to our apologizing. It's in 1 John 1:9. "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Following the Confession in our Holy Communion Service we have the Absolution – the declaration that God forgives those who in faith confess their shortcomings and sins. Again, the Book of Common Prayer is a bit more searching than our current Prayer Book. The Book of Common Prayer Communion Service has these words in the Absolution – "Almighty God ... hath promised forgiveness of sins to all them that with hearty repentance and true faith turn unto him ..." Hearty repentance ... true faith. It's another way of saying that we have to be fair dinkum about our Confession if we are to receive God's forgiveness. Merely uttering the words of the Confession are not enough ... the words must be accompanied by **hearty** repentance and by **true** faith.

And there are another couple of qualifications to God's forgiveness that we have to take into account as well. In the Lord's Prayer we pray, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." We pray, in effect, "Lord, forgive me to the same extent and in the same way that I forgive others." Think about that. If we don't forgive others we are praying, in effect, "Lord, don't forgive me" – for that's the extent and the way that I'm not forgiving others. It's exactly what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. "If you forgive others their wrongdoings, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive others their wrongdoings, neither will your Father forgive your wrongdoings." (Matthew 6:14-15).

At one stage Simon Peter came to Jesus with this question. "How frequently shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" The Jewish rabbis taught that three forgivenesses were enough. Peter was being generous in his question. Jesus was being absolutely prodigal when he replied, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven." (Matthew 18:21-22). You can easily count and remember three forgivenesses – even seven forgivenesses given to a person. But keeping track of 490 of them is far more difficult. And what Jesus was saying here to Peter was a very Jewish way of saying that there is no limit on forgiveness. When you are offended against – forgive – to infinity – to seventy times seven times seven times seven.

It was Mahatma Gandhi who said, "The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong."

The Absolution in our Holy Communion service assures us that God forgives – but we have our part to do as well. The Absolution in Holy Communion assures us that God's love is always open to us, always extended to us. The Absolution reminds us that we have God's forgiveness in our present moment – that the past does not need to shackle and limit us. The Absolution reminds us that the love and grace of God are eternal and are big enough for all our shortcomings and failings. The Absolution reminds us that the future lies before us – the immediate future and the long-term future – and we can live that future in the love and power of God. The Absolution reminds us that we can have peace with God, peace with our fellow humans and peace within ourselves.

The Absolution assures us that we can go in the peace of God, to live our lives lovingly to the full, and to the praise of God's glory.