

It Is Not Karma It Is Sin

Dear friends in Christ, may the grace and peace of the Lord with you all.

Our Gospel reading this morning shows us the highest purpose of the Church, to bring sinners to God. It's a simple, yet a complicated matter, isn't it. It is simple because the message is clear, "repent or go to hell." That's the message one of my boys wanted to preach in a Good Friday service when we begun the tradition that the youth will lead the service on Good Fridays. I told my son, well you are the son of the pastor, so it is fitting that you preach the sermon... but he didn't like the idea, in fact his response something like "no way..." or something like that. But then after a while he came back, and said, I'll do it. I'll preach the sermon, and I have it ready, do you want to hear it? I said sure, please, let's hear it. "Repent or go to hell! Amen." There you have it, he said. And with good reason, repent or go to hell! That's it! That's all we must do!

But saying it like that although to the point, it doesn't sound as inviting, does it, but even Jesus said it that way "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matt. 3:2) He did so, but he did through word and deed, through word and deed brought about the repentance of sinners, and we the Church also must do the same. But how, that's the question.

One way is to dialogue. Have a conversation with a friend, walk with them, go fishing with them, go hunting with them.... Isn't that which Jesus did? He took his disciples fishing! There his actions showed that we sinners need the Saviour. And that the Saviour came to seek the lost, sinners.

Now, a point of conversation could be something like karma versus reality. Even among Christians I have heard thoughts on karma, perhaps not explicitly but it is so.

Being at the bedside of those close to death but taking a long time to take their last breath. Or of those who have been in a critical condition for a long time, I have heard people saying, what have they, the dying or the critically ill, what have they done that are in such a situation. Sure, karma is getting to them. That person must have done something terrible in his or her life, and now they are paying the price. If so, then, buckle up because in their minds, it could drag for a long time Karma is not finished yet... their sins could be far worse. I know I case like that. But that could be a good starting point for conversation, and a way to lead them to Jesus' net, so to speak.

Where can a sinner go for help when he or she thinks God exists only to even the score through karma? Sadly, that's the question and perhaps unspoken question they ask, and in their quest for answers, they turn to religious gurus for answers, they look for Christian and non-Christian religious gurus that answer they crave for. And for an answer that placate God's anger. What else could a person do but wait in fear for the hammer to fall again?

This is an extreme example of a malady that is all too common—living in the world with a guilty conscience. You don't have to be a religious person to have this debilitating disease. No one needs the Ten Commandments to know things like lying, cheating, stealing, and hurting other people are wrong—and that you deserve to be punished for doing them. A guilty conscience is living in fear—fear of losing the respect of others, of losing your husband, wife, or job. It's the terrifying. It can lead to isolation. You can't have a genuine relationship with the people around you or with God. When you see only an angry God, even when karma is pressing hard, you can't cry out to God for help, because his job is to make sure you pay for your sins.

Where can a sinner go for help when he thinks God only exists to even the score? I think far more people are living this way than we realize. They've grown used to it as a way of life. But it's a sad life of fear and isolation—waiting for the day karma will catch up.

The problem is worse than most people think. People with a guilty conscience understand God is good and that they are not good, because they've done bad things. Most people think that we're called sinners because we sin. But God says we sin because we are sinners. And that is far worse.

I'm sure you've heard something like this: "People learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart." It sounds nice and hopeful. But is it really as easy as saying "stop hating" and "start loving"? The Bible says the opposite is true. The Ten Commandments teach people to stop hating and start loving, but God says the Law can only reveal the disease and cannot cure it. Our fallen human nature is incapable of loving God or loving one another as we should. By nature, we love ourselves—and our charity for others extends only until it gets in the way of loving myself, even if loving myself just means giving myself a good feeling for being so generous.

People who try to become right with God by following the Law are fighting a losing battle against the symptoms without seeking the cure for the disease. Where does it leave people who try and try to stop doing the things that make them feel guilty—only to discover that the harder they try, the more they're drawn to do those very things?

The problem is not just that we've done bad things; it's far worse. God is light, and we are darkness. In our fallen human nature, we are incompatible with God, and there's nothing we can do about it. That's why, as soon as Peter realized who was on his fishing boat, he fell on his knees and begged Jesus to go away: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man" (v 8).

Most people believe the problem of sin is as easy to solve as teaching people to "stop hating" and "start loving." They are sadly mistaken. Unlike most people, Peter understood the problem was far worse. We sin because we are sinners.

But what we see in our Gospel reading is something different, as you see, when Jesus caught a sinner in his net, it lifted the burden of guilt. Peter was afraid because he realized that behind the human flesh of Jesus burned the terrifying glory of God. What he didn't realize was that God took on human flesh to cure the debilitating disease of sin. In Jesus, God calls terrified sinners into his net, unto him.

Peter was a fisherman who'd had a terrible night. Over and over, he'd cast his nets into the deep water, only to pull them up empty. The next morning, he was on the shore cleaning his nets when Jesus asked to use his boat for a pulpit. Peter had a front-row seat at church that morning, listening to the word of God from the mouth of the famous rabbi. When the sermon was over, the preacher told the fisherman, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch" (v 4). "I'll do it," Peter said. "But I think you should leave the fishing to me. I guarantee there are no fish out there."

But no sooner had those nets hit the water than they were filled to the breaking point with fish—so many fish they had to call another boat for help; so many fish that both of those boats were sinking from the weight of them. That scared Peter, he wasn't marvelled at the dollar signs when he looked at all those fish. He saw danger. What he saw didn't make sense though. That's not what normally happens on a fishing trip. But God had other plans, for God was with him in the boat! And

he did recognize that, so Peter fell down on the deck with those flopping fish and begged, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”

Like those fish out of water, Peter was waiting to die, and in a way he did. His old sinful nature, the old Peter did die. But then God breathed new life into him with a word: “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men” (v 10). By that powerful word, God lifted the burdens of guilt and sin from Peter’s shoulders. Peter was no longer afraid of God’s presence. He longed to be as near to God as he could. He left everything behind to follow Jesus.

Jesus went fishing for men that day. He cast the net of his powerful word into the deep water of this world and pulled a terrified sinner up onto the boat. What a wonderful thing to be caught up in Jesus’ net! Do you remember when where you caught up in Jesus’ net? Most of us don’t, it could have been at our baptisms, that’s where most of it happens, or it could have been at another time too.

But back then Peter was afraid when he realized who was on the boat with him. What he didn’t realize was why Jesus stepped onto his boat. God had come to cure him of the disease of guilt and sin. His fear melted away when he heard the word of Jesus.

Jesus said to him, “From now on you will be catching men.” Like the prophet Isaiah in our Old Testament Reading, God sanctified the lips of Peter and the other apostles to preach his powerful, holy Word. From the boat that is the church, Peter cast the net of the Gospel into the deep water, and God pulled millions of human beings onto the deck.

The Good News Peter preached is that God sent his glorious Son to take on human flesh so that he could take human sins onto himself—your sins, and Peter’s sins, and the sins of the whole world—die on a cross, and on the third day rise again. Jesus absorbed every bit of bad karma and every bit of God’s anger the moment he died. Not only that, but when God baptized you into Jesus’ death, the old sinful you also died, and a new person arose. The only cure for the disease of sin is death and resurrection—and that is exactly what Jesus gave to you in Baptism. Cured of the disease, you can confidently call on God in every situation. This doesn’t mean you won’t struggle with your old sinful nature; it means the new you will seek God’s help when you do struggle. The deck of the boat that is the church is where you find that help. The same holy flesh and blood that stepped onto Peter’s boat is here today on this altar—the glory of God hidden in the bread and wine. He is here to help you.

Oh, what a wonderful thing to have been caught in Jesus’ net! God has taken the heavy burden of guilt and fear from your shoulders and given you new life. Instead of running away from God, you now long to be as close to him as you can.

Jesus said to Peter, “From now on you will be catching men.” Peter threw out the net, and God pulled billions of people onto the boat that is the church.

And now we also have a net to cast for desperate sinners. That net Jesus has put into our hands. Peter said as much: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9). Like Isaiah, like the apostles, God sanctified your lips to speak his powerful, holy Word to suffering sinners.

I wonder how many people are out there living with the terrible disease of a guilty conscience. How many are living in fear of being discovered, waiting for karma to catch up? How many don’t know that God loves them and wants to help them? We will never know unless we cast the net.

We have the cure in our hands. God sanctified our lips to speak his powerful, holy Word to suffering sinners. There is still room on the boat.

I know what you're thinking. The water around here has been fished out. Maybe, but then again, there are lots who even though go to church, still think that God is there waiting to get even through karma. And maybe we have thrown out our nets and drawn up nothing for a long time now. Yet because Jesus has spoken the word, we will do again, and again, and again...

In his name, amen.