

**+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

Today's selection of readings encourage us to take heart and not lose hope, even when there are things happening around us in the world near and far that challenge our sense of purpose and can make us wonder what we are called to be as people of faith. The year 2021 is better for us in most parts of Australia than it was in 2020. However, we are still in the middle of a pandemic. This pandemic is unlike others which have had such impact on the ordinary lives of people in every country of the world. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century people are better equipped to save lives. The medical technology and capacity to prevent one third of a population dying, which is the expected mortality outcome of any pandemic/plague/scourge, is exponentially better than it has ever been before. Our pandemic will no doubt last much longer than those before it because human beings are not willing to suffer massive deaths among populations if it is possible to save at least some lives.

We weigh up costs every day of lockdown of a major city. How many lives will be saved by all the non-essential businesses and services closing? Is the short-term economic pain worth it? How many more people, individuals and families, will be economically unable to endure yet another extended closure of business? What are the other costs? What is cost to mental health? What is the impact on children and adolescents growing up now? What are the real economic costs for ordinary workers and their families? How many people have given up hope and committed suicide? Is it more than might die from the virus?

The costs of the repeated lockdowns are immense. Yet we are people who value human life over everything else, and so we lock down because that is the immediate response to stop it getting worse. We get angry over the trivialities of footballs being kicked over the fence and international students returning to Australia, yet we ought never to miss the point. Despite all the inadequacies of process and ineptitudes of the people implementing strategies, the goal is preserving human life and quality of life. In the end it might mean that the worst of this pandemic goes on for a decade instead of three or four years, that it has changed our lives forever. But could we do anything differently? Should we risk the deaths of a third of the population by ignoring the threat and carrying on with our usual extravagant lifestyles,

business practices, international trade and travel, and just take the cost for what it is, an unpleasant necessity?

In 2021 human life matters. Sometimes it seems human life doesn't matter as much in certain parts of the world or among certain cultural groups, and that fact should make us stop and take notice, remember that as Christians we are called to act on injustices after the work of Jesus. It is all too easy to think that injustices are hard to change and we in our comfortable places are powerless to make a difference. Yet enabling any form of injustice, even when it is far from us, brings us close to the brink of sin.

Corporate injustice seems even more impossible to counter. When entire countries are decimated by the same virus that we lock cities down in Australia after a single case then Christians need to turn to God in prayer. Human lives matter in South America, India, Africa, the Middle East, and all the parts of the world which do not have the capacity to record case numbers, let alone administer vaccines. Jesus calls human beings everywhere to account. Corporate and individual sin are nestled beside each other in false comfort and security.

Jesus teaches about sin in this very difficult passage we have heard from the gospel of Mark today. He teaches about the unforgiveable sin. Just like looking past the faces of suffering in others, we can look over this passage and find a less-challenging focus. However, to ignore the central message of the unforgiveable sin is to collude with the scribes who challenged Jesus for being under the influence of Beelzebul.

The way in to understand his teaching here is the concept of division. In the church we are used to division. It has been a fact of the church since Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenburg just over 500 years ago. The global Anglican Church knows about division in the current era. At present the push from the conservative GAFCON (Global Anglican Future Conference) movement threatens to destabilise the unity of the worldwide Anglican communion. Even locally, members of this group encourage breaking away from the Anglican Church. The great prayer of Jesus from John chapter 17 where he prays for the unity of the church falls unheeded to the ground and the words of our own diocesan vision, that we be united and connected communities echoes forlornly.

Jesus does not envisage division among his followers. Of course, the apostles would have to deal with division and thus we have the letters of Paul to the errant churches who so quickly have lost their way.

The charge of being in league with Beelzebul that the scribes who have come from Jerusalem apply to Jesus is easily defended by Jesus. The scribes are set up to miss the point completely. Something much greater is to be taught here. We can easily understand that if Jesus has Beelzebul the ruler of demons inside him then why would he cast out demons? To do so would be to make himself weaker. Rather, the demon infused Jesus would invite more demons into people and make himself stronger. A divided body of people is open to corruption and sedition. In Australia, we have witnessed the behaviour of political parties over many years which has seen leadership spills and prime ministers fall by the way in rapid succession. Jesus rightly says that a divided kingdom cannot stand, a house cannot stand, even Satan cannot stand if it is divided against itself. Indeed, no one can enter the strong man's house and overpower him unless there is division in the house, and he is betrayed.

As we think about division, Jesus leads us into one of his most challenging teachings, the teaching of the unforgiveable sin. Surely every sin is forgiven. Jesus died for the sake of our sin. Surely not one sin is beyond the cost of the cross.

We must not soften Jesus' words here, as tempted as we may be to make the gospel easy to access, forgiveness an assurance of sin. We must not explain away his words so that they are meaningless. All that Jesus says about the unforgiveable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is to be measured by the overarching truth of the gospel. This truth is that where there is real repentance, or even the possibility of repentance, sin is forgiven by God. The hope of forgiveness resounds in the last verse of today's psalm: Your loving kindness, O Lord, endures for ever; do not forsake the work of your own hands. That is, I am your created being, do not leave me utterly unforgiven.

The attitude of the psalmist has shifted from the short-lived arrogance of the people calling for a king to rule over them from the Samuel passage. They had rejected God, but as the psalm

assumes, they will repent, and God will forgive them. Why cannot God forgive the sin against the Holy Spirit?

This sin is not an impulsive sin, a blasphemy easily uttered in the heat of a moment. Neither is it a deliberate rejection of the Holy Spirit made in anger or ignorance, a self-destructive desire to turn from the light of God and embrace pain and suffering. This sin, the unforgiveable sin, is a perversion of spirit within a person which defies human morality and elects with all faculties to reject good, to call the light darkness.

Even the scribes may not be justified as having committed this sin, even though they said of Jesus that he had an unclean spirit, thereby rejecting the divinity that stood behind, within and before him. The scribes are set up in the story. They play a role. It is only God who may judge the sin within them, assess whether it really is against the Holy Spirit. However, the scribes serve to illustrate the moral peril of which all who consciously reject the good for evil without intention for repentance, stand in danger of committing.

This sin goes beyond what any mortal human being can know. We might witness such sin in the examples of self-adoration and self-worship of people who have been leaders of nations, who have done terrible things to the people, who have committed genocide, yet even then we do not know whether there is repentance, and they are forgiven. Only God treads on this ground. Jesus however, warns of the limit, even he who was the one who maximised all possibilities for forgiveness and expressed the extent of divine grace, even he warns of this sin.

The awareness of this edge ought not be lost. Think of the tyrannical matrons of nursing homes and orphanages who have manipulated the well-being of the people in their care, the religious leaders who have betrayed the trust of the vulnerable, the faceless corporations which have imposed deep and lasting suffering on people. The sin might not be genocide, but the sin sits on the precipice of the unforgiveable abyss.

And so we are left today with no clear answer on the unforgiveable sin, only the assurance that God goes in the places where no human being can go. God knows the extent of sin and the depth of a human heart, whether repentance is possible. This is God's space, God who creates and who receives, in whom we belong.