

## Blandford Forum - Sunday 1 July 2007

Rev Tim Storey

"True Confession "

Nehemiah 9, James 5

During the Kuala Lumpur to Perth leg of a [British Airways Flight 9](#) on [24 June 1982](#), [volcanic ash caused all four engines](#) of a [Boeing 747](#) aircraft to fail. Although pressed for time as the aircraft rapidly lost altitude, [Captain Eric Moody still managed](#) to make an announcement to the passengers.

*"Ladies and Gentlemen,  
this is your Captain speaking.  
We have a small problem.  
All four engines have stopped.  
We are doing our damndest  
to get them going again.  
I trust you are not in too much distress."*

Understatement.

There is something classically English about the way we do things. We look at all those Johnny foreigners and we get snooty about the emotional ways of the Italians or the hysteria of the Spanish. It's all very Tim Henman. He wins a match 13-11 in the 5th set and we say "Jolly Well Done" But perish the thought that we should offer any emotion into the situation. Perish the thought that we should show that we care. And we laugh at the antics of those who dress up in funny hats or wear silly outfits to sit on Henman Hilland show that, actually *they do* care.

When strange things started happening in churches in the early 90's, associated with the Church in Toronto what was the first thing that happened? People got quite uppity, saying that it was all too emotional. It was simply not British. Now, OK, I am caricaturing, but I think you know what I mean: it has become offensive for us to show deep emotion.

Wednesday lunchtime and Mr Blair chokes with emotion at the end of his final Prime Ministers Questions and we all go "Ah, how sweet". Maybe not, but in the attempts to retain the British Stiff Upper Lip there is a real danger that we have lost the ability to be emotional when things need to be emotional. And when it comes to our faith emotion plays a real part. When it comes to sin, the recognition of sin and the forgiveness of sin, emotions have to play a part. It is not a rational, cerebral exercise.

Yesterday, Dominic and Loasa stood here and they pledged their love for each other and made vows. It was not a contract, a rational something in their minds that told them that this was the best possible option and the most effective outcome for their relationship. It was about love. Yes, they had to work out using their minds, the potential results of getting married, but the decision was rooted in their love for each other.

When we come to confess our sin, there is a rational thing which goes along the lines of:

- I have sinned.
- I need to deal with it to get on with life.
- Jesus died on the Cross to deal with sin.
- I will ask him to take my sin.
- I am free to get on with life.

The problem is that when we reduce Confession to a transaction like this, we take away the emotional side - we lose the motivation for doing it, the motivation of guilt and pain at the effects of our actions.

Go to the story of the Prodigal Son:

Luke 15:17-21

*"When he came to his senses,  
he said, 'How many of my father's hired men  
have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!*

*I will set out and go back to my father  
and say to him:*

*Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.  
I am no longer worthy to be called your son;  
make me like one of your hired men.'*

*So he got up and went to his father.*

*"But while he was still a long way off,  
his father saw him  
and was filled with compassion for him;  
he ran to his son,  
threw his arms around him and kissed him.*

*"The son said to him,*

*'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.  
I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'*

The motivation of the Son in the story is somewhat functional and rational. I've messed up. I know where I can go in order to sort it. And his approach to his father is almost transactional: take me on as a hired hand. In fact, his confession is full, but his expectation is limited and I suspect it is limited because of the rehearsed nature of his confession.

The title this morning is "True Confessions"

Three simple questions:

- How deep is our awareness of our sin?
- How real is our Confession?
- How great is our experience of Forgiveness?

#### How deep is our awareness of our sin?

The problem which I am trying to highlight with the stuff about understatement is that we have all-too-often got to a point where we understate our sin. We don't see it as serious enough to waste energy on. And as a direct result, we offer reasons and excuses for it.

There is a difference between reasons and excuses. There may be a reason why we did what we did, but it can never excuse our sin. Nowadays, genetics will tell us we have predetermined propensity to do this or that. If it isn't in our genes, then we can blame our childhood, or the person who teased us at school. There may, indeed, be reasons why we gave into temptation rather too easily, but it does not excuse the pain and grief we have caused others and, above all, God.

And the result is that we offer a half hearted confession by way of an apology. Do you remember Zinedine Zidane's "moment of madness" in the world cup final last year?

His "apology" went along the lines of "I'm sorry, but what I did was to react to provocation so I'm not sorry that I did it, only that what I did was a bad example." It is a tortuous way of saying: I am sorry but it wasn't my fault. It is straight out of the playground: I am not going to take the blame. And the result will no doubt that there will be an ongoing war of words between Italian and French football in every match, European or World for years to come.

If we do not face up to the depth of our sin then we do not deal with the cancer it causes.

In the book of Common Prayer, the words that are used in the Confession are extreme:

*ALMIGHTY God,  
Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
Maker of all things, judge of all men;  
We acknowledge and bewail  
our manifold sins and wickedness,  
Which we, from time to time,  
most grievously have committed,*

*By thought, word, and deed,  
Against thy Divine Majesty,  
Provoking most justly thy wrath  
and indignation against us.*

*We do earnestly repent,  
And are heartily sorry for these our misdoings;  
The remembrance of them is grievous unto us;  
The burden of them is intolerable.*

*Have mercy upon us,  
Have mercy upon us, most merciful Father;  
For thy Son our Lord Jesus Christ's sake,  
Forgive us all that is past;  
Put aside the archaic language for a moment  
- can you or I honestly and truly  
express those emotions?*

*We acknowledge and bewail  
our manifold sins and wickedness?*

*We do earnestly repent,  
And are heartily sorry for these our misdoings;  
The remembrance of them is grievous unto us;  
The burden of them is intolerable?*

If we are absolutely honest the answer is probably "no". The mood of this generation is that we have excised the emotions of our failure before God.

**One - How deep is our awareness of our sin? and two, as a consequence, How real is our Confession?**

A member of my family attends a Church which meets in a school. It is a lively and happy place and the worship is upbeat and uplifting. There is a contrast with how they perceive the downbeat worship of much of the traditional Church. And yet, the member of my

family says how much they miss the complete absence of confession. They bypass the Cross and go straight to the Empty Tomb. It is not a unique approach - many, many churches follow that line. Oh, it is easy to see why: Crosses and sin are not strong selling points. You don't need a Government Focus Group to tell you that in order for people to engage fully with the Christian message, they have to sooner or later look inside and see the mess which needs sorting. Yeah, that is a really attractive thing to preach. And my fear is that not only do they not deal with the sin that remains unconfessed, but that their balance of worship is all wrong.

### **How real is our Confession?**

James said this in our reading: James 5:16 *Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.*

Now these verses have been misused many times in order to make a direct connection between physical illness and sin. James is talking about the Healing and the Wholeness of the total person. There are sometimes connections but not all the time - the real healing that we seek is inner healing.

How many times have you put off going to the Doctor because you think it will be OK, because you think the pain will pass eventually? It is only when someone, usually someone close to you say "Please, just do it" that we get off our backsides and take action.

James says confess your sins to each other Now. I do not necessarily think that he means for us all to stand up in Church and say things along the lines of: "I swore at the cat on Thursday" or "I nicked some paper-clips from work" Or, more pertinently, "I am having an affair" or "I have got a habit which I cannot shake off". In the classic understatement we can say stuff about swearing at the cat or nicking paper-clips and nobody will take much notice. But I think James is saying that we need to address the bigger issues: the issues of marital fidelity, the habits we all get into, the so-called serious sins. We need to be prepared to admit that they exist, because, at the moment, I don't think we get near that.

Over the past few weeks I have come back time and time again to the verse from Joshua: ***"Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do amazing things among you."***  
**Joshua 3:5**

Hands up those who want to see God do amazing things. Hands up those who are ready to consecrate themselves in preparation for it.

OK, now lets be honest: Hands up, those who are ready to consecrate themselves in preparation for it, if it means true confession, opening ourselves up to God at a level where we are exposed. I am not suggesting an orgy of confession where people try to outdo each other with the seriousness of their sin. Neither am I suggesting that we *necessarily* confess things out loud. This is about us opening ourselves up and letting God deal with the depth of our sin.

In a moment, we shall sing a song which, I suspect, we know quite well: *Purify My Heart*.

The second verse says this:

*Purify my heart, Cleanse me from within  
And make me holy.  
Purify my heart, Cleanse me from my sin,  
Deep within.*

Deep within.

Deep down

- the stuff which has never been dealt with
- the stuff that nobody sees.

Do we want it to be dealt with - now?

One **How deep is our awareness of our sin?**

Two, as a result **How real is our Confession?**

And three, **How great is our experience of Forgiveness?**

Remember the woman in Luke 7 who anoints Jesus' feet with expensive perfume. Jesus' response to those who criticised was simple "Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven - for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little." Luke 7:47

Our worship is directly connected to our Confession.

If we do not recognise our sin, if we do not recognise the depth of our need, then our confession will be half-hearted in response, and our experience of forgiveness will be equally half-hearted and our love in return will be half-hearted. And our worship will be inevitably half-hearted, too. Our experience of forgiveness is directly related to our awareness of our sin and the reality of our Confession.

In Nehemiah we hear of the story of the rebuilding of the ruined Temple when the Children of Israel came back from exile in Babylon. And in Nehemiah we hear of them standing in front of the Temple confessing their sin, consecrating themselves before God. We heard 5 verses but there is a chapter or more of real, true confession of what they had done. Because when they had dealt with it, they knew that way and that way alone, they could be free to worship.

Verse 5 said this: ***And the Levites ... said: "Stand up and praise the LORD your God, who is from everlasting to everlasting." "Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise.***

Three very simple questions

- **How deep is our awareness of our sin?**
- **How real is our Confession?**
- **How great is our experience of Forgiveness?**

If we want to truly consecrate ourselves not just for the weekend away but for a life of praise and worship as disciples of Jesus Christ, then this is not an optional extra but a fundamental part of our growth to maturity.