

Langton Long - Sunday 1 July 2007

Jennie Rake

"True Confessions "

Nehemiah 9. James 5

1. The need for healing

Recently I've experienced some painful dental problems that have helped to illustrate today's talk. I'm not very brave when it comes to going to the dentist - but I *do* go *and* regularly. I had some pain that seemed to be increasing over a few days so I booked an emergency appointment - which never comes as soon as you wish!

Something seriously nasty was going on inside one of my molars. It was not possible to see my regular dentist and the person deputising was only able to carry out temporary remedial treatment, so another appointment was made. Then the pain started escalating, from a few minutes at a time, then half an hour or more at a time, to constant pain, but still the tooth hadn't been sorted out. The pain got so bad because of some infection and inflammation that I needed penicillin as well as the strongest pain relief. It took 2 days before the penicillin kicked in so sleep wasn't easy. Eventually I managed to get the troublesome tooth excavated, the trapped infection completely removed along with the remaining nerve. Once this action had been taken the relief started to be felt. Within 2 days the pain was subsiding.

So the steps taken were:

1. Identify the problem
2. Deal with it
3. Move on

Sounds easy when you sum it up like that! That's what we have to do about sin. If it isn't dealt with, it's like the infection in the tooth that causes more and more trouble. Sin that hasn't been sincerely confessed can create a barrier so that the potential that God has for us is unfulfilled. We need to be whole in all senses of the word.

2. Confession and Healing

This morning's New Testament reading from James includes advice for a healthy church - prayers of confession and prayers for healing. The two are linked - there are not two separate ingredients in a church service or in a Christian's life. Jesus linked healing and forgiveness of sins too. Remember the man let down through the roof on the stretcher? Jesus' first response was to say, "*Friend, your sins are forgiven.*" He then healed him of his paralysis, so he was healed completely in body, mind and spirit. Confession of sins and forgiveness are part and parcel of healing. If we are not honest with God and with each other then we cannot be whole people. Like the hidden infection in my mouth, the unconfessed sin festers away within us. You may have heard this described as "dis - ease" in other words - disease.

3. Honest with God?

James was encouraging his hearers to be open and honest - in other words to be real with God and one another. As far as our relationship with God is concerned we can't hide from

him - no matter how we might try and fool ourselves.

Psalm 139 reminds us of that:

“You know when I sit down and when I rise; you perceive my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord...where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up into the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.”

We can't hide from God! We may be able to fool each other about the less than attractive parts of our character - about the less than charitable thoughts, words and actions - but God knows us through and through. If we don't tackle those sins - or rather if we don't allow God to deal with them, then they fester inside like my tooth. If we are wanting to minister God 's love as his disciples, we also need to be open and honest - forgiven, healed and ready to move on without any old baggage.

4. Honest with each other?

Perhaps though, it may be easier for some of us to be open and honest with God when the confession is a silent prayer that no-one else hears? However, James encourages us to be open and honest with each other about our failings - our short-comings - our sins, and ask each other for prayer. That's why we have prayer ministry available. It's healthy to deal with our problems, be able to own up to them and get them off our chests. It's also important to be able to own up to what we aren't.

Perhaps that sounds like being ready to admit to not being Superman or superwoman? Of course it is! But the good news is - God is quite prepared to leave the work of his kingdom to imperfect and flawed people like us. He just asks us to be open about we cannot do and what we need help with.

I can thoroughly recommend the forming of prayer partnerships to help you tackle your problems. I had a prayer partner over about 10 years - a lady who was a good friend as well as being a wise and mature Christian. We met on a regular basis and prayed for and supported each other through some difficult and painful times. Having trust between the two of you is important, and also the understanding that it is an equal partnership, where both of you are going to be honest and open. It mustn't be just a one way business. Also, it mustn't turn into a situation of dependency. It is God who we must depend on above all.

5. Dealing with guilt

Remember what I told you about my tooth problem? Once the root cause was dealt with, I was able to move on. Sadly, many of us are not able to move on, even when we have brought our confession before God and heard the priest pronounce the absolution. We hear that God forgives a penitent sinner, we are told that forgiveness brings spiritual healing, but we think maybe God has some exceptions to the rule - us!

No, that is not so. He does not make cruel decisions about who will or will not be totally forgiven. We do need to hold onto guilt about our shortcomings, although of course, it is right to feel sorry about them. There is enough evidence in Jesus' teaching to show us the loving Father heart of God is open to all his children.

Let me tell you about a lady I once knew. She is no longer alive, but I for this morning's illustration I shall refer to her as Margaret. Margaret was a lady racked with guilt. Try as she might, she could not seem to be free of it. This had gone on for over 50 years. It had started when she was a young married woman when her children were at Infants school. She was happily married and had plenty of friends. One couple she and her husband knew well - Jean and Bill - went to the local Salvation Army church. She used to go along with

them sometimes, but her husband Len preferred to stay at home. Margaret found that she grew closer to her Salvation Army friends and found herself attracted to Bill, although the friendship never turned into anything more. Margaret remained faithful to her husband.

However, one woman must have noticed Margaret's friendship with Bill and put two and two together and came up with five! The woman was a teacher at the children's school and when she saw Margaret in the playground one day as the mums were gathering to collect their children she made a comment to the effect of: *"You should be ashamed of yourself, going down the Salvation Army and throwing yourself at other men!"*

Margaret was surprised and shocked at this hurtful remark, and although she knew she had not been unfaithful to Len, she decided to stop going along with Jean and Bill if this was what people were thinking. She prayed to God about the hurt she felt and asked him to forgive her. For a while she believed that God had forgiven her, but then the guilt returned. She avoided the teacher as much as she could and when the children moved onto another school, Margaret felt safe from any malicious comments.

Many years later Margaret and Len moved away and set up home several hundred miles south, closer to where their daughter was now living. She joined the village church and settled into a new routine and made new friends. The village and church were expanding and new families joined the fellowship. One day Margaret sat in church waiting for the service to begin when she noticed one of the new families arriving with grandparents in tow. They sat in the pew in front and being a friendly person Margaret got chatting with them after the service. Brenda and Roger introduced Roger's parents to Margaret and it turned out that they lived close to where she and Len used to live.

Several times a year Roger's parents would turn up in church whenever they visited and Margaret thought there was something familiar about the mum. She became worried that this might be the lady who had insulted her all those years ago, although the lady herself never showed any recognition of ever having met her.

Margaret poured all this out to me one day when the feelings of guilt from all those years became too much for her to bear. If she ever passed Brenda in the street and Brenda did not greet her with a bright smile Margaret interpreted that as proof that Brenda's mother-in-law was in fact that very same woman. Margaret tried to pray but could get no peace. She asked me to pray with her, but could get no peace. She was going down some sort of spiral of guilt. Even when I did a little detective work to find out if Roger's mum had ever been a teacher and discovered that she had been a Secondary school needlework teacher and not an Infant's school teacher, Margaret still could not get out of her mind that this lady was this same person who had come to haunt her.

Margaret could not bring herself to speak to her son or daughter about this burden of guilt that she had carried over fifty years. She confessed her weakness to God and to me, but had picked up the burden of guilt straightaway and held on to it. It was like a disease eating away inside of her. It made her nervous, fearful and low in self esteem. She may have taken it to the grave with her. Only God knows.

6. Lay it down - no fishing!

When God forgives us, it's like our sin being taken far out to sea and dropped to the ocean floor, then God putting up a sign saying "No fishing!" Margaret kept fishing for that guilty past, but God had forgiven her. There was no need for guilt.

We have also heard that time is a great healer, but it's not the only answer. For Margaret it had not brought healing.

Summary

So let me sum up my thoughts today.

1. We are called to confess with a true heart before God and each other.
2. True confession leads to wholeness.
3. Jesus treated forgiveness as an important part of physical healing.
4. When God forgives, we need to move on.
5. Having a prayer partner or prayer triplet - three of you praying together - can be very helpful
6. Honesty and openness between us means healthy relationships and a healthy church.