

Followers of the Way

Sin is sin

Heather Scammell 14/09/2025

Good Morning, everyone, welcome to the first in a series with the encouraging title 'Good News For Our Times,' and here I am to pour cold water over us all with a talk on Sin! 'Sin,' a little word with so much meaning, a word with 'I' right in the middle, defined in the dictionary as 'an immoral act considered to be a transgression against divine law', it encapsulates all that is wrong in this world. The biblical word for sin, khata means 'to miss the mark or fail,' so why start a series on Good News with Sin?

There is method in the madness in that one of the difficulties in proclaiming Good News is that so many don't understand that they need to hear it, they have been seduced by the lies of a society that has turned its back on God and convinced itself that 'anything goes'; 'tolerance' has somehow become a byword for defending the indefensible, and anyone who questions the prevailing dogma is to be ostracised as a 'bigot', a 'racist' or 'far right.' The concept of 'sin' has been erased from the National psyche. But at the same time our Nation is in chaos, the economy is in free fall, and all the portents, from both prophetic Christian voices and economists, is that we are hurtling towards a very bleak period indeed.

You may be sitting there thinking, 'We know all this, we're not sure how we got here, but thank the Lord that I am a Christian and God will provide.' In many ways I am with you, but we do have a mandate to continue Jesus' calling (in the words of the chorus):

He sent me to give the Good News to the poor
Tell prisoners that they are prisoners no more
Tell blind people that they can see
And set the down trodden free
And go tell everyone the news that the
Kingdom of God has come
And go tell everyone
The news That God's Kingdom has come.

So, can we just hunker down and weather the storm? Or are we called to be more proactive? If so, how does that translate to our individual circumstances? The passage Jesus quoted (which led to him being driven out of the synagogue and his home town) is from Isaiah 61. I have been dipping into Isaiah quite a lot lately - it started in all innocence when I had just finished a very gruelling consultation on the future of my local hospital (for which I have been fighting for a number of years) and was feeling particularly low, when into my Twitter Feed (it still feels awkward to call it X,) popped a verse from Isaiah which really did feel like the Lord giving me a hug and saying, 'Don't worry, I have got it under control.' It was so good, I thought, 'I must share that with my hospital prayer group.'

Do you think I could remember it? Or find the post that so moved me? No, so I started reading through Isaiah in the hope of finding it. Normally we like Isaiah, we have all those lovely Christmassy readings, 'The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light,' 'Comfort ye, comfort ye my people saith the Lord,' or 'Here am I, send me' which has been echoed by many in their call to service, but I really would encourage you to look at the less well-thumbed sections, because as I skim read it looking for my 'hug,' I was struck by just how much of what I was reading describes the UK today – and it is not pretty! What is laid out quite clearly are the consequences for a Nation that has turned its back on God; a Nation that prefers to live under the consequences of its own sin. As a word of caution, I am NOT claiming that we are the 'new Israel', as in Replacement Theology, but I am underlining that the UK, when it was proudly Christian, has known much blessing and punched well above its weight on the World Stage. But as it has allowed the diminution of the faith that has shaped us for so long, it has spiralled into a vortex of its own choosing.

Isaiah describes a Nation riddled with iniquity, which in Biblical terms means moral perversity, depravity, or wickedness – a deliberate twisting of what is good and right against God's will or law, often from a corrupt heart. Does that sound familiar? A.I. tells me that the Hebrew word *avon*, translated as 'iniquity,' signifies a bending, twisting, or distorting of God's standards, leading to harmful, self-serving, more profound deviation from God's righteousness, compared to simple 'sin' or 'error.' Our word 'iniquity' comes from Latin, combining the prefix *in-*, 'not', and *aequus*, which means 'equal' or 'just.' So 'iniquity' literally means 'not just' – when we hear of 'two tier justice,' God is way ahead of us, warning us that this is the direct consequence of our collective actions. 'Iniquity' can also be used to say that something lacks moral or spiritual principles – remember all that talk of our 'moral compass' from politicians, whose actions give the lie to their rhetoric?

There is a sense in which the Old Testament speaks to a culture that is very much rooted in collective responsibility, whilst the New moves us towards a personal encounter with the Risen Christ; but in recent years, we have allowed the lie that Religion is purely a personal matter and our collective responsibility has been hollowed out. This has allowed a multiplicity of beliefs being treated as being of equal merit – a not so subtle means of destroying our core identity as a Nation. Even more iniquitous has been the elevation of less moral communities over and above our own. But the reality of that is even worse, because we have tolerated, and are now being exhorted to 'celebrate', that which is demonic in origin – be it foreign gods, pagan practices, or lifestyles that run counter to the word of God.

And the consequences are plain for all who want to see it - even in the extract we heard this morning we had:

rebellious children,
an iniquitous population,
corruption,
estrangement from God,
sickness in the 'head' (Leadership) & heart (spirituality)
wounds that won't heal,
desolation in the country (think of wildfires, poor harvests, rural poverty)
cities burned with fire

foreigners devouring the land

And if you were wondering about *'the daughter of Zion being left like a shelter in a vineyard, like a hut in a cucumber field'*, these refer to temporary structures that are abandoned and left to rot once the season is over, hence *'like a besieged city'* that has been laid to waste and abandoned. The phrase *'daughter of Zion'* personifies the city of Jerusalem, or the people of Israel, as a cherished, yet often chastised, daughter. The term can refer to the inhabitants of the city or nation as a whole, representing God's covenant community that experiences cycles of sin, judgment, and eventual redemption and restoration. As Christians, we are grafted into the Jewish stem and the UK, through its Christian heritage, has held a special protection under God which, as a result of our wilful rebellion, is being withdrawn.

So times are bleak, we know that, yet God makes it plain that if we turn to the Lord in repentance, there is restoration:

*Though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red as crimson,
they shall be like wool.
If you are willing and obedient,
you will eat the good things of the land;
but if you resist and rebel,
you will be devoured by the sword.'*

So the ball is very much in our court - as has been said time and again, the UK really is on a knife-edge. But whilst we are all too aware, the Nation at large and, dare I say, much of the Church, seems completely oblivious as to our parlous state.

Do you remember the L'Oreal adverts, "you're worth it"? They always had a slight cringe factor, pandering to the over-inflated valuation of self that is a hallmark of what has been described as a 'Me Generation,' but more recently, the mantra from those who seek political change has become 'The UK deserves better.' Does it *really*? From where I am standing, it is only by the grace of God that we are not already deeper into the abyss and those who seek a human solution to this spiritual crisis are set for crushing disappointment. As GK Chesterton observed, when a man stops believing in God, he doesn't believe in nothing, he believes in anything. And this seems to be where we are today and segues nicely into our New Testament reading - it really does seem that people today reject 'sound doctrine' - we're back to the accusations of 'bigotry, racism and being far right,' to which I alluded at the beginning. There is a plethora of self-help gurus and far too many in Christian pulpits saying *'what their itching ears want to hear'* as too many *'turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.'* But those myths aren't necessarily cuddly folk tales or whimsical 'fairies at the bottom of the garden,' it would be much easier to be discriminating about these. What we are bombarded with are a number of half-truths and distortions, packed up in enticing language, but with an iron fist in the velvet glove for those who dare to question or criticise the prevailing dogma. We have been told for years that 'Diversity is Our Strength', but diversity of thought is not tolerated. Every Terrorist attack leads to an insistence that Islam is a 'Religion of Peace,' mosques proliferate, overt displays of Islamic dominance are tolerated whilst Christians

are arrested for silent prayer outside Abortion clinics and Christian street preachers are arrested, (but never their Islamic counterparts). Halal meat has been widely supplied to public institutions, without informing the unsuspecting consumers, and there are at least 85 Shariah Law courts in the UK, in spite of their total incompatibility with our legal framework or culture.

We are told to be our 'authentic selves' by a society that remoulds women with botox, fillers, silicon and an inability (or unwillingness) to acknowledge biological sex, whilst men are feminised by a society that condemns 'toxic masculinity' and pretends that women can do everything that men can do and more. Casual antisemitism is widespread, and Hamas propaganda treated as fact by both Left and Right alike. 'Mindfulness' (in reality Buddhist meditation) has been widely promoted across Schools as a means of combatting increased indiscipline, whilst a huge range of 'alternative' practices with dubious spiritual roots are celebrated, as the Golden Calf of the NHS crumbles under an inability to cope with a burgeoning population with increasing ill health. Yoga, tai chi, reiki, crystals, 'meditation' that looks within the individual instead of to Almighty God are heavily promoted, whilst Churches implode as they pander to the Spirit of the Age and ignore the charge to *'preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction.'* (2 Timothy 4:2)

You may now be thinking, "Yes, we know all this, it is very sad but what are we supposed to do, other than *'be in the World, but not of it'*(John 17:6)?" But actually there is a very serious point to all this, because it all highlights the fact that *'our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.'* (Ephesians 6:12) All the practices I have listed – and many more - are the result of allowing the demonic to flourish in our Nation. This was brought home to me fairly recently as I realised that many of those I know who are most staunchly anti-semitic and/or resistant to the Gospel have had involvement with, or are engaged in, some sort of occult practice - they have been hypnotised, attended a spiritualist Church, consulted a medium (that's quite a popular form of 'entertainment in my area), attended one of the New Age exercise classes, or consulted an alternative medicinal practitioner (that's a hard one with the NHS in Free Fall, and it's not always easy, or even appropriate, to say, 'Can I pray with you about that?'). When I was younger, it was whether Christians should read horoscopes (we shouldn't!). But that's tame by today's standards, and every flirtation with the demonic builds up a resistance to the Gospel - it can be palpable. Sadly, Christians are not immune - concern for the planet quickly morphed from the Biblical concept of 'stewardship' to Gaia worship, worshipping the created rather than the Creator, with significant demonic underpinning and a huge economic consequence.

I know a practitioner of 'Christian Tai Chi.' 'Christian' Yoga has been surprisingly popular, even though the whole ethos is geared towards Hindu gods, and there are many more areas where we unwittingly engage with the demonic. I am loathe to give too many examples, because it is for the Holy Spirit to convict and there may well be areas of which I am completely unaware, but my not mentioning them does not mean that they are OK. Any and all of this brings us under bondage, which curtails our freedom in Christ and hardens us against the Holy Spirit; it can stop us from hearing clearly what the Lord is saying and it can foster disunity within the Church. This doesn't just harm the individual, it impacts the Body of Christ – and, as we were reminded last week, if one part of the Body

suffers, we all suffer. I am well aware that some of our number engage in ministry to those enmeshed in occult practices, but that is different from flirting with it for personal reasons, and today I feel very strongly that the Lord wants to challenge us over becoming desensitised to that which hardens us against Biblical precepts, and potentially creates 'landing strips' for demonic oppressors. Our calling to be IN the World, but not OF it, means that we necessarily rub shoulders with those who do not share our values, and it is right that we do so because how else are they going to hear the Gospel? But that brings its own dangers – if you work alongside those who regularly use **Bad Language**, it becomes less jarring and easier to slip into the odd swear word, likewise with Blasphemy, and whilst we may not openly use the Lord's name in vain, what about the acronyms that are becoming increasingly popular? I made a prayerful decision a while back not to like or retweet anything on Social Media that uses bad language, and that has proved quite a challenge (I have had to unlike, or even unshare on occasions, when I have been so swept up in agreement with the sentiment that I have not noticed the colourful language!) Ephesians 4:29 says, *"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."* In order to remain sensitive to what is 'unwholesome talk,' we need to guard what we hear and, whilst we may not be able to control our workmates or colleagues, we can guard our choice of entertainment, be it radio, TV, Social Media or our choice of music, cinema or theatre.

How often does what passes for 'entertainment' feature **sexual perversion & moral corruption**? We read or watch it and it shapes our thinking, then we more readily accept it when we encounter it in reality. Affairs don't start in the bedroom, they start with a conscious decision to stay and chat, to go for coffee, to allocate time to another person; and all those little decisions that can lead to a broken marriage are so much easier if we are immersed in a culture that decrees that this type of behaviour is perfectly normal. Perversions that are tolerated, then encouraged in the wider world, are celebrated in literature and drama. Remember, the soap operas began as a means of promoting information or propaganda, and today they readily nudge us into 'right thinking', by the alignment of particular view-points with engaging or obnoxious characters and treating as normal lifestyles which would once have been a source of revulsion. Sympathy in the abstract can so easily lead to acceptance in the concrete. And that is without feeding individual temptation. No wonder Paul urged the Corinthians to, *'Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body.'* (1 Corinthians 6:18).

Then there is Entertainment – books, music or shows that **glorify sin and rebellion**; remember that, *"rebellion is like the sin of divination and arrogance like the evil of adultery"* (1 Samuel 15:23). Too often, secular entertainment celebrates that which God condemns. We become embroiled in the plot or the music, or engage with the characters and cease to be shocked by the content; we become desensitised and begin to conform to the World. What we tolerate in fiction today, we tolerate in reality tomorrow.

Confession time - I recently went to a Beatles' Tribute Band. It was very much a last minute thing and I went on my own; I had a ball! But I was struck by two things – the abnormal, completely hysterical reaction in the streamed footage of the girl fans, particularly on the first US tour, and secondly, how truly awful are the lyrics to John Lennon's 'Imagine'. But the woman next to me turned and said, 'The World would be a

much better place if we lived according to this song! The culture we absorb (and I didn't realise just how many of the lyrics to their songs I knew) shapes our world view. But Romans 12:2 admonishes us, *"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will."* It doesn't mean that we should never engage with the culture (unless it is an openly blasphemous, anti-Christian performance) - we would be very isolated creatures if that were the case. But perhaps ask yourself first, "Will it discredit Almighty God for me, His child, to be seen at this event? Will it edify me to engage with this?" Learn to be discriminating!

Ephesians 5:11 warns us to, *"Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them."* But too many songs have lyrics that **glorify drugs, immorality, violence and perversion**; God, purity and holiness are too often the source of mockery, whilst rebellion, pride and self-worship are celebrated and our sensitivities are blunted. We need to hone our instincts on the whetstone of the Holy Spirit on a regular basis, we need to be aware that we are called to live by our Father's standards, and that they are set for our protection. If we feel too comfortable IN this World, are we becoming too much part OF it? Do we need to separate ourselves from situations that are likely to prove a barrier to our relationship with a God who is so Holy that He can tolerate no sin? A God who is jealous and wants to delight in our company, and for us to delight in Him? Do we too often prefer to indulge in the pleasures of this World, rather than the delight of God's company? It is by spending time with Him that we become fine-tuned to His standards, which in turn enable us to live 'life in all its fulness.'

I have already touched on the dangers of dabbling in **New Age** activities, but we need too to guard against any entertainment or teaching that incorporates New Age manifestations or is rooted in self-godhood. It wasn't so long ago that I only knew the word 'manifest' from a hymn with the line 'God in man made manifest,' but these days it seems to be everywhere and it is all about 'if you imagine, or think something hard enough, it will become a reality.' So not only should we not engage with anything like this, because of the obvious occult underpinning, but it means we have to be very careful in our use of language, lest others misunderstand and think we endorse that which should be condemned; just as the word 'meditation' has been commandeered by New Agers to mean something introspective, rather than pondering on the Word of God as originally understood (I tend now to talk of Contemplative Prayer to avoid confusion,) so the understanding of 'manifest' has been corrupted from something that is an outworking of God's Love for His creation, into a self-aggrandising, demonically inspired occult practice. We need to wise up! Any self-help promotion that is not explicitly rooted in overt Christianity should probably be treated with suspicion and, if there is any doubt, is best avoided altogether.

We need too to be aware of **false teaching** that twists the Gospel, we need to test everything we hear, watch or read (including what I am saying this morning), and God has given us a plumb line to facilitate this in the form of the Bible. But if we are dulled by false teaching, be it entertainment or teaching from a pulpit or social media that puts individual wealth or health above holiness, salvation and righteousness, we very quickly become desensitised to the Truth. How can we be the salt and light that this dark world so desperately needs, if we are diluted by compromise with the World? It is not surprising that Paul was particularly harsh in his admonition in Galatians 1:9, *'... so now I say again:*

If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!

Horror movies and novels are another area where we can really open ourselves up to the demonic, they corrupt the God given emotion of fear into something benign for our entertainment, but they also expose us to spells, incantations and visual imagery that glorifies evil and dishonours Almighty God. They are *often* based on real life demonic manifestations and use incredible special effects to enthrall, entrance and desensitise you to the reality of evil, and open us up to a spirit of fear instead of the fear of the Lord, which is *the beginning of wisdom* (Proverbs 9:10). *For the spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline* (2 Timothy 1:7).

Linked to this is any content that normalises the **Occult and Witchcraft**. Deuteronomy 18:10-11 explicitly prohibits such practices, "*Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire, who practises divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead.*" So I hope we can agree that we should not look to anything for 'entertainment' that indulges in or glorifies these practices - far too many in our society regard this as 'harmless fun.' This year shops seem to be promoting Halloween more than ever - but that 'harmless fun' is a gateway to spiritual bondage and worse. We need to bring *our* sensitivities into line with Almighty God, which increasingly sets Christianity apart as being counter-cultural, but that enables us to speak Truth into an ever-darkening world.

This has been quite a heavy session, but that reflects the parlous state of our Nation, and our call to *Be holy as [our] father in Heaven is Holy* (Matthew 5:48). It would be relatively easy to address the problem of sin from the outside and lament the failures of Society, as though we were not integral to that Society - and we may feel bemused that so much has gone wrong in our lifetime. But we are not immune to the prevailing culture and need to acknowledge our own temptations and fragilities, because these are the battles and the challenges that we are obliged to confront in order to be transformed into the image of Christ. The darker our world, the brighter His light shines:

May our lights shine before others, that they may see our good deeds and glorify our Father in Heaven (Matthew 5:16)

Amen