FIFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR—Cycle C

As you know, normally the first and third readings on a Sunday are rather clearly interrelated, while the second reading—often from the letters of St. Paul—is usually on a quite different topic. Today, however, there is at least one way in which all three readings touch on the same subject. The vision suddenly given to the prophet Isaiah fills him with dread of his own unworthiness and uncleanness, and yet one of the seraphim assures him that his wickedness has been removed, his sin purged. In our second reading, Paul is likewise keenly aware of his own unworthiness and sinfulness, claiming that he was not fit to be called an apostle because he had persecuted the church, and yet he too was changed: "By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me has not been ineffective" (1 Cor 15:10). Indeed, it led him to travel throughout the Mediterranean basin proclaiming the Good News that "Christ died for our sins … and was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures" (vv. 3-4). Finally, in our Gospel reading, the other great apostle, Peter, likewise confesses his unworthiness: "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man" (Lk 5:8). So in all three readings there are emphatic references to one's sinfulness, making it almost incumbent on me to talk about this subject, perhaps especially because we do not hear much about sin these days. A few decades ago there was even a best-selling book with the title *Whatever Became of Sin?*[1]

If I try even briefly to summarize what Scripture says about sin, it would not be sufficient merely to say that it is presented as some kind of offense or transgression of God's law. One of the most highly acclaimed studies of sin in the Bible is titled *Sin: A History*,[2] in which the Old Testament scholar Gary Anderson shows that there were two major and rather different understandings of sin in ancient Israel. In some texts, mostly early ones, sin was primarily

thought of as a weight or burden that had to be carried. This is evident, for example, at the very

beginning of the Book of Isaiah, where Israel is called a "sinful nation, a people laden with

wickedness" (Is. 1:4), and it is graphically described in the regulations for the Day of Atonement

in the Book of Leviticus, where a live goat is brought before Aaron, who lays both his hands on

its head and thereby transfers all the iniquities of the people to the animal, which is then led out

into the wilderness. What's going on there? Well, Aaron has symbolically placed the weight of

Israel's sins on the goat, which carries them out into the wilderness, where they cease to burden

the people who had once committed them. Even though the weight of iniquity could not be

annihilated, it could at least be banished.

Quite different was the understanding of sin after the Israelites' return from the

Babylonian exile and the building of the second temple at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. From

then on, the predominant metaphor was no longer sin as a weighty burden but rather as a debt,

with forgiveness being the remission or non-collection of the debt. Since Jesus himself lived and

taught in this milieu, it is not at all surprising that, for example, the text of the Lord's Prayer in

Matthew's Gospel has the verse "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Mt. 6:12), or

that the parable of the Unforgiving Servant has the same symbolism, concluding with the

master's saying to malefactor: "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you

pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?"

(Mt. 18:32-33). This also explains why almsgiving became so important a part of Christian

practice, for if sin is a debt, this means we owe money, and if virtuous activity is going to be a

credit, then the most obvious way to accumulate credits is by giving away money to those in

need. Such giving was actually understood as making a loan to God, as we read in the Book of

Proverbs: "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward him for what he has done" (Prov. 19:17).

Both of these metaphors—sin as a weighty burden and sin as a debt needing to be repaid—are certainly still valid for us today. If, with St. Paul, we want to praise and thank the Lord for all he has done for us, this could well be in terms of Christ's bearing the weight of our sins, just as it is said of the Suffering Servant in chapter 53 of Isaiah: "My servant shall justify the many, their iniquity he shall bear" (Is. 53:11). But we could also understand Christ's saving work in terms of the cancelling of a debt, as in the Letter to the Colossians, where the key verses read literally: "When you were dead in trespasses … God made you alive together with [Christ] when he cancelled the debt of all our trespasses, erasing the bond of indebtedness that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross" (Col. 2:13-14).

Nevertheless, I think we would have to admit that the metaphors of sin as burden and sin as debt are not the most prominent ones today. When asked what is the dominant one in our own time, Professor Anderson replied in an interview: "I think the dominant language of sin and forgiveness is that of the therapeutic … [whereby] the seriousness of sin is often dramatically underplayed. What might have been seen as sin in the past is now understood as something reflecting my upbringing or other formative circumstances."[3] Now however fine a scriptural scholar Anderson may be, he surely misses the pastoral mark in this evaluation. For one thing, there are plenty of passages in Scripture itself that speak of sin as a kind of illness and of God or Jesus as a healer or physician. We need think only of Jesus' saying, "Those who are healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do. I have not come to call the righteous to repentance, but sinners" (Lk. 5:31-32). To disdain this therapeutic model seems to come from an overly juridical

approach to wrongdoing, where someone in a court of law would have to be declared either legally guilty or innocent. This kind of strict dichotomy may be necessary in a juridical setting, but it is too simplistic in other respects. The moral theologian Timothy O'Connell is much more faithful to the teaching of Jesus when he writes:

> Criminals are to be punished, normally with severity … On the other hand, the sick are to be recipients of the most tender human mercy and care…. The appropriate Christian response to the sinner is reconciliation and forgiveness. By underscoring the powerlessness, disorientation and weakness of the sinner, this model invites compassion and mercy for one who is lost, as opposed to judgment and punishment for one who is evil.[4]

This does not underplay the seriousness of sin nor does it deny personal responsibility, but it does honestly recognize that there are limits to our freedom. The fact that a movement like Alcoholics Anonymous and other Twelve-Step programs have been so effective in helping millions of persons succeed in ongoing recovery is not at all because they have somehow eliminated the ethical issue of personal responsibility but because they have relieved the sufferer of a disproportionate, crippling sense of guilt and have simultaneously empowered him or her to take more responsibility for their actual freedom. This is not a denial of personal wrongdoing and certainly not some unrealistic attempt to recapture lost innocence, but is instead a way of helping one move to a new sense of wholeness without denying the past. All this is, of course,

altogether in accord with Jesus' own way of dealing with sinners, as when he told the woman caught in adultery, "Go, and from now on sin no more" (Jn. 8:11). As we draw near the beginning of Lent, a traditional time for focusing on our need for reconciliation with God and with one another, let us take advantage of the wonderful sacrament of reconciliation, trusting that we will find in its priestly minister someone who is as compassionate and as empowering as was Christ himself.

[1] Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1973).

[2] Gary Anderson, *Sin: A History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009).

[3] Anderson, "The Evolution of Sin" (an interview by John Wilson), *Christianity Today*, March 2010, p. 32.

[4] Timothy O'Connell, *Sin as Addiction* (New York: Paulist, 1989), 132-33.