

## Forgiveness not condemnation, what's all this talk about sin?

More and more I think such an idea is becoming increasingly difficult and this may be something to do with 'language' and the way in which we apply the language of sin to our deeds, in particular the notion of guilt and punishment for sin.

First of all is it right that we should even retain the word 'sin' in our vocabulary – after all, haven't we been given the capacity to make choices? So why should any particular choice of mine be regarded as "sinful" if I am exercising my will, or my freedom to act as I please? Isn't sin merely an extension of my desire and therefore my right to carry out that desire? If sin is an exercise in freedom, what's wrong with that? Nothing you might, say except that my freedom to act as I please takes no account of your freedom to act as you please, and this is where it begins to get tricky. I say this because clearly we can't all simply do as we please and ignore the consequences and effects of our decisions. Of course no-one likes their freedom curtailed, but how is freedom served if we create a world where what I chose to do, and who I do it to or with, inhibits that person's freedom to express their own choice or desire?

By recognising this constraint we have made a judgement and this judgement involves the development of the concept of right and wrong and of good and evil. When we explore the story of Adam and Eve what we are really being taught is that the freedom we have to make choices as well as being centred on our own desire and our own benefit, nevertheless must also recognise the impact it will have on those around us. Adam and Eve were always free to make their choice, God did not deny them the capacity to choose and choose they did. However the consequence of their choice did not serve well the freedom to choose which they always had. The element that becomes apparent to them is that their freedom, whilst still remaining particular to their person, has become informed. Their deed in choosing as they did, offered them insight as to how their choice changed them, and I think that this is where we should mark our understanding of what sin is and of what it does, because their relationship with God, by their choice changed. So by sinning, we are saying that our freedom to choose, whilst remaining integral to who we are, will if wrongly exercised change our relationship with God.

How is this to be addressed particularly in our modern society where there is an almost 'anything goes' attitude to peoples' individual freedoms. Freedom wrongly exercised is damaging both to the individual and to the community. The story of today's gospel emphasises the point most powerfully as the individuals involved in the adulterous affair and the all too quick to act mob demonstrate. Nothing good or formative is going to come from the confrontation; the exercise of freedom by the adulterous couple has led to a horrible marital breakdown, and the intended action of the mob in their freedom to exercise their condemnation will end in a judicial death. In stopping the whole thing in its tracks, Jesus has caused them to think about what 'freedom to choose' really means and entails. His words to both the woman and to the mob, though different in their context, highlight for them a powerful rejoinder that freedom and choice should never be at the mercy of our desire. God never changes his desire for us; sadly it is us who change our desire for God.