



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Second Sunday in Lent, February 24th, 2013

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

THERE is something curiously old fashioned about Lent. In fact, it is hard to conceive of an aspect of the Christian faith more out of step with the animating philosophy of this generation than an entire church season devoted to self-examination and repentance. It is a concept utterly alien to the culture prevailing in the opening decades of the 21st Century.

Self-examination, of course, isn't the stumbling block. Every age seems to generate a sobriquet: The mid 18th century, for example, was dubbed "the Age of Elegance," while its closing decades are known as "the Age of Revolution." If this age were to be similarly characterized, then it might well be apt to call it "the Age of Introspection."

But the truth of the matter is that this grossly understates the case. Introspection is altogether too mild a word to describe extraordinary self-absorption that is one of the primary characteristics of our age. "Self obsession" might far better sum, up the fashionable preoccupation with our own psyches.

The thing that makes Lenten-style Self examination so old fashioned, so out of step, is that its vital element, its whole purpose, is contrition and repentance. Contrition and repentance are out of favor these days because the process implies one might have been guilty of something that merits repenting. And guilt, these days, seems to be considered the root of all

evil. Judging by the way people speak about it, one might be forgiven for thinking that the only thing we might need repent is making another human being feel guilty.

The technical term for Lenten self-examination and repentance is "The Sacrament of Penance." It involves carefully considering one's thoughts and actions of the past year, confessing one's mistakes, and apologizing to God – and if necessary one's fellow man – for having committed them.

Funnily enough – or perhaps, not so funnily – modern self examination is precisely the opposite of the genuinely Christian variety. Today we are encouraged to examine ourselves not for the purpose of discovering the things for which we should rightly feel guilty, but for the purpose of eradicating guilt. We pay huge sums to therapists who help us do that; far more than we would ever dream of putting in a church alms bason.

Doubtless, such therapists earn their money because it is very difficult to help folk review their lives and conclude that they are not guilty of anything. Think about it – most of us are only too painfully aware that we have done hundreds of things about which we should rightly feel ashamed, going right back to our childhood.

So what our therapists have to do is either

convince us we haven't done the things we know we ought not have done, or, alternatively, convince us that somebody else was to blame. The latter is by far the most popular approach because it isn't easy to convince even willing accomplices that they haven't done things they know full well they have done.

This explains why so many people are dumping on their parents these days. It is not that their parents have done anything that particularly merits their censure, so much as the fact that parents are the most convenient targets of opportunity. It is not hard to unearth such things as minor teenage resentments and then to magnify them out of all proportion in order to account for one's failings today.

Blaming our nearest and dearest for our own personal failings is one of the oldest and most unlikable of all human traits. Indeed, if you consult the third chapter of the Genesis, you'll discover Adam invented it. When God asked him if he had eaten of the tree of knowledge, Adam didn't do the manly thing and own up to wrongdoing. Not a bit of it. He immediately tried to shuffle all the blame off to Eve: "The woman whom thou gavest me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat."

Not very admirable behavior, one might think. Not very convincing either: God didn't buy it because Eve didn't force Adam to eat. He could – and should – have said: "No." But, like us when we know we are doing wrong, he didn't say "no." He might have done so out of a misplaced desire to please Eve. That, however is not the point. He knew God had forbidden them to eat the fruit of the tree, but he did so anyway. Thus the fault lies with Adam just as much as it did with Eve.

When Adam offered that lame excuse, God didn't even bother to answer him. But then he didn't need to. No matter the intellectual gymnastics Adam performed in order to evade responsibility, there was no way he could evade the conviction of his own conscience. Adam's was an experience eloquently summed up in the words of the collect which talks about "We, who by our consciences are accused . . ."

All of us are "by our consciences accused . . ." It is simply part of our human nature. Just as our capacity to smell, to hear, to taste and to see is part of our human nature, so too is the capacity of our conscience to convict us of wrong doing. To be sure, we can suppress our consciences by refusing to use them – just as we can suppress and sublimate our other faculties – but we cannot rid ourselves of them entirely. In other words, the efforts of so many people to rid themselves of guilt are doomed from the very outset.

Sometimes it seems that many of the people in this generation would do anything – pay any price – to rid themselves of the pain caused by a guilty conscience. And it is, as we all know, a very painful thing to suffer from a guilty conscience. Indeed, the mental anguish it causes often far outstrips physical pain.

But before we can conclude that God is very cruel to remind us of our short comings in this most painful fashion, perhaps we would do well to remember the purpose of pain. God gave us physical pain to warn us when something is going grievously wrong with our body. It's like a fire alarm, only far more efficient. How many of us would bother to do anything about our ailments if it wasn't for the pain they cause. It is the pain that compels us to go to the doctor.

It's exactly the same with spiritual pain – mental anguish, if you will. Spiritual pain – the pain caused by our consciences – tells us when something is spiritually amiss with us. If we didn't have the mental anguish unleashed by a guilty conscience, we would not know when we had done things we ought to repent. And, of course, without repentance, God cannot forgive us, no matter how much he might want to do so.

Our consciences are the means by which God enables us to take advantage of Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the Cross. If we didn't have a conscience to alert us, we would pass it by. God gave us our consciences as an act of love, and act of mercy. Let us make good use of our consciences this Lent. For God's forgiveness is the cure for all the pain that we will ever experience. *AMEN.*