



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The First Sunday in Lent, February 18th, 2018

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

It is hard to conceive of an aspect of the Christian faith more out of step with the animating spirit of this generation than the notion of an entire church season devoted to self-examination and repentance.

It runs entirely counter to the prevailing culture – even though some may claim self-examination is the primary preoccupation of our times. So much so, in fact, that if the 18th century is appropriately described as "the Age of Elegance," our own times could well be dubbed "the Age of Introspection."

But this would in fact grossly underestimate the case. Introspection is far too mild a word to describe the extraordinary self-absorption that has become a primary characteristic of our age. "Self obsession" far better describes our fashionable preoccupation with our own psyches.

However, the thing that makes Christian self-examination unique – so odd, so quaint, so out of step – is that its entire purpose is to identify our faults and flaws so we can apologize to God and try to amend our lives.

Confession, contrition and repentance are quite out of fashion these days because the process implies we might have been guilty of something that merits repenting. And guilt is apparently considered to be the root of all evil. In fact, judging by the way so many people in the mental health business

speak about it, folks might be forgiven for thinking the only thing for which we need to repent is making somebody else feel guilty.

That said, the technical term for the sort of self-examination that Christians are urged to practice during Lent is "confession." This involves carefully considering our thoughts and actions over the past year and apologizing to God – and if necessary our fellow man – for those of which we are ashamed.

Funnily enough – or, perhaps, not so funnily enough – today's version of self-examination is the polar opposite of the Christian variety. Today people are encouraged to examine themselves not for the purpose of discovering the things for which they should rightly feel ashamed, but for the purpose of eradicating guilt. And they pay huge sums of money to therapists for helping them to do just that – far more than they would ever dream of putting in a church alms basin.

These therapists, doubtless, work hard to earn their money because it is difficult to help people review their lives and conclude they aren't at all guilty of anything. After all, most of us are painfully aware that we have done many, many things about which we should rightly feel ashamed.

It means therapists need either to convince

their patients that they haven't done those things that they know they ought not to have done, or else convince them that some one else is to blame. The latter approach seems probably to be the most promising. After all, it's not 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 actually merits their censure, so much as the fact that parents are convenient targets of opportunity. It is not hard to recall minor teenage resentments and magnify them out of all proportion in order to account for one's present failings. A Monty Python's Flying Circus Skit has morphed into reality: "It's not my fault. Society is to blame."

But then blaming our nearest and dearest for our personal failings is an old and exceptionally unlikable human trait. In the third chapter of Genesis we read that when God asked Adam if he had eaten of the tree of knowledge, Adam didn't do the manly thing and fess up. He immediately tried to shuffle off the blame to his wife: "The woman whom thou gavest me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat."

Not very convincing: God didn't buy it. Eve didn't force Adam to eat. He could – and should – have said: "No." He might have eaten the fruit to please Eve. But Adam knew that God had told them they could eat all the fruit in the garden except the fruit of that one tree, but he did so anyway. In other words, the fault lies with Adam just as much as it did with Eve.

When Adam came up with his lame excuse, God didn't bother to answer him. He didn't need to. No matter the mental gymnastics Adam went through to evade responsibility, he could not escape the conviction of his own conscience. Adam's experience is eloquently expressed in the words of the

collect: "We, who by our consciences are accused . . ."

All of us without exception are "by our consciences accused . . ." It is simply part of our human nature. Just as we smell, hear, taste and see, so our consciences convict us of wrongdoing. We can suppress our consciences. We can refuse to act upon them. But we cannot eradicate them entirely. Thus efforts to rid ourselves of guilt are doomed from the very outset.

But it should come as no surprise that so many today are desperately trying to eradicate their feelings of guilt. It is, after all, very painful thing to suffer from a guilty conscience. Indeed, the anguish inflicted by a guilty conscience often far outstrips the agony of physical pain.

But before we accuse God of cruelty to remind us of our shortcomings in such a painful fashion, we should remember the whole purpose of pain. God gave us physical pain to warn us when something is going wrong with our earthly bodies. And the same thing is true of pain inflicted by our consciences. Without the mental anguish prompted by a guilty conscience, we would be unlikely to repent and thus obtain God's forgiveness.

Our consciences enable us to take advantage of Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the Cross. Were we not alerted by them, we would in all probability pass up the forgiveness God promises those who repent.

God so loved the world he gave his only begotten son to the end that all that believe in him should not perish but have everlasting life. And, in his love and mercy, he gave us consciences to enable us to take advantage of this great gift. *AMEN.*

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.