

Basics of the Faith 3: The Power of Sin & It's Cure
Romans 3:21-26
January 26, 2020

I don't know about you, but when I read a novel I enter into the life of the central character. If the novel is one in a series, I begin with the first and move through the series chronologically. That way I enter into his or her skin as they live out their lives. Maureen O'Donnell is the central character in Denise Mina's trilogy of crime novels set in modern Glasgow.

Maureen lives in a flat at the top of Garnethill, the highest hill in Glasgow. She grew up with an alcoholic mother and an abusive father; her older brother is a drug dealer and her closest friend is Leslie who works in a shelter for women. Leslie is a hard character who rides around on a motor bike dressed in leather. Both drink and smoke too much, and especially Maureen who is fragile and haunted by fear. She seems destined, like many in the modern west, to live out her life under a dark cloud. Maureen spent some time as a psychiatric patient. She suffered a breakdown as a consequence of her father's sexual abuse who disappeared from the family right after. He left Maureen scarred by his abuse. She is out of hospital but stuck in a dead-end job, and is carrying on a secret affair with a married therapist. How is one to escape this cycle of violence, drink, abuse and fear?

There is a moment in the third novel when Maureen comes close to a young woman who has been saved by her faith in Jesus. Both Leslie and Maureen go to meet Maddie who is a former prostitute turned Christian. They meet her at a Sunday service in the Holy Cross community hall. Jack Gibb is the pastor of this rather drab and poorly attended community church. But there is enthusiasm and faith that shines through their testimonies, both by Jack and Maddie. Neither Maureen nor Leslie are moved by the service, and like many today, just don't get it. But it is the only moment in the novels when faith shows itself with the promise of redemption shining in the face of Maddie. But for the most part redemption, healing and hope are drained from these novels like vegetable soup through the strainer. Brokenness, fear and addictions seem to be the only constant in

Maureen's life. For her, and countless folk like her today, there seems to be no escape from the cycle of sin and despair that hang heavy over many lives today.

Maureen is one example of how powerful and devastating the downward pull of sin is in the human family. None of us is a stranger to this pull and its consequence. Indeed, in his letter to the Romans Paul opens with three chapters of devastating critique of just how powerful and debilitating sin is in our lives. None of us escapes its powerful and dark influence. One will not find a more devastating and darker portrait of the human race anywhere in the bible. Everyone, Paul says, is under the curse of sin and God's judgment.

Here is how Paul expresses it:

So where does that put us? Do we Jews get a better break than the others? Not really. Basically, all of us, whether insiders or outsiders, start out in identical conditions, which is to say that we all start out as sinners. Scripture leaves no doubt about it: There's nobody living right, not even one, nobody who knows the score, nobody alert for God. They've all taken the wrong turn; they've all wandered down blind alleys. No one's living right; I can't find a single one. (Romans 3:9-12 The Message)

In the NRSV it goes: *What then? Are we any better off? No, not at all; for we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin...*

But there is a ray of hope injected into the midst of this catalogue of despair and sin. In chapter one Paul says:

For I am not ashamed of the Gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith." (Rom 1:16ff)

Something has been thrown into the mix to alter the portrait and the result. There is hope. But first Paul must remind the Christians in Rome why this diamond of the Gospel is so bright and beautiful. After all, if you want to show off a diamond's colour and light you place it

on a black cloth so to better appreciate its brilliance. So too is it with the Gospel. Against this black background of sin and despair Paul will now show just how beautiful and shimmering with light is the good news.

Just because we are infected by this disease called sin in the Bible doesn't mean we are not religious. Quite the opposite actually.

Somewhere in the mid 2000's we watched **Rome** the Television series produced by the Brits. What impressed is the profound sense among Romans, rich and poor, of the influence of the gods. All their lives are lived out under the power of the Roman gods. To these gods they pray, they sacrifice, and hope for salvation, for safety and for a future life after death. As Paul would remind the Greeks when he visited Athens, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way." Everywhere in the Roman Empire, as in any empire, the gods were everywhere present in the life of the people.

Let this be a reminder to all of us that even in the great empires of the present, yes, even the Western empires, the gods are present and active. We are, like the ancient Romans, a very religious people. It is a question of to which gods we offer our allegiance. For many today their gods may not be as crass as the idols worshipped by the Romans and Greeks, but they are just as powerful and influential.

On one of my visits to my brother in Scotland I rose from bed too late to go to church. So, I told my brother at quarter to eleven Sunday morning I would try and find a church. I failed. Instead I found another gathering of worshippers, a much better attended worship centre than any church in the city. At 11 o'clock Sunday morning, to my utter amazement, I witnessed hundreds of people swarming the Gyle Shopping Centre in Edinburgh in search of their material goods. I shouldn't have been so amazed by this but I guess I'm not out in the world too much on Sunday morning. Perhaps it's the same in Hamilton. I thought to myself that all was present there in that shopping centre to be the modern cathedral: the fountain for baptism and the eating court for the communion. The moderns have chosen their gods, one of which is the powerful and influential god of materialism. We bow to her with complete abandonment. And from her we expect happiness.

Paul reminds us that God has provided a very different avenue to salvation. The important word that introduces this new section starting with verse 21 of chapter three is the simple word “but”. After a severe catalogue of our sinfulness throughout the first three chapters in which our human condition is under judgment, he introduces a little word “but”. Little words can mean a lot. Paul says:

But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed...the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

While everything looked bleak and unpromising in Paul’s portrait in the opening chapters, now everything has been turned around by the introduction of this little word. For the Maureen’s of the world, for the Ian’s and the Leslie’s, the Jane’s and the Robert’s, the Brian’s and the Gail’s, indeed for all of us sinners who have tried everything to avoid or to placate this invisible God who stands behind the physical universe, for all of us God has provided a way to a restored relationship with himself. This way is through faith in Jesus Christ. Nothing else can achieve this restored relationship, not our own efforts at self justification through our good works and respectability, but only God’s grace and forgiveness make this possible.

What does this word “righteousness” mean here? God seeks to restore the broken relationship with the human family. God has taken the first move to alter the cycle of sin into which the human family has fallen. The good news of the Gospel is that God has chosen to give us a new chance to enter into relationship once again. But it has to be on the basis of faith. It is only when we finally give up on our own efforts to be righteous that the possibility of a restored relationship is possible. It is trust in the finished work of Christ, his life, death and resurrection that opens the door to our salvation.

This restoration is possible for all. It is not confined to religious folk in church. It is God’s offer for the human family. It is for “all who believe”. It is not the private possession of the righteous minority who attend worship. It is God’s offer through the church to every Maureen and Leslie. Surely there is nothing more rewarding for us as Christians than to be channels of this grace to others. Seeing that

friend you have been praying for coming to faith in Jesus is a beautiful thing. This is basic to Christianity and we need to get back to it.

Here's how the Message translates Paul's words: *Since we have compiled this long and sorry record as sinners and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, God did it for us. Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we're in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ. (Romans 3:21ff)*

Amen