

**Title: Confession**  
**Text: Isaiah 6:1-6**  
**Date: 29 January, 2012**  
**Preacher: Rev Stu Cameron**

Last week we began a new series called Postures of Prayer. Over this month we are exploring four different modes of prayer that together make up a well-rounded, healthy prayer life. These four modes of prayers are:

Adoration  
Confession  
Thanksgiving  
Supplication

Together these four forms of prayer make up the acronym ACTS.

We began last week with Adoration. We discovered that adoration is bowing before the beauty of God. The language of adoration is praise. The posture of adoration is on our knees. We continue this week with the practice of confession.

If adoration is bowing before the beauty of God, confession is bowing before the holiness of God.

There is a story told of a small boy who was writing a letter to God about the Christmas presents he badly wanted. "I've been good for six months now," he wrote.

But after a moment's reflection he crossed out "six months" and wrote "three." After a pause, that was crossed out, and he put "two weeks." There was another pause, and that was crossed out too.

He got up from the table and went over to the little nativity scene that had the figures of Mary and Joseph. He picked up the figure of Mary and went back to his writing and started again: "Dear God, if ever you want to see your mother again..."

In Mark's gospel Jesus points out a stark reality:

No one is good – except God alone.  
(Mark 10:18)

Confession arises from the recognition that God alone is good. Confession is the only right response when we are confronted with the holy perfection of God.

Seven hundred years before Jesus made this statement, the prophet Isaiah had a life-changing vision:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty;  
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.  
(Isaiah 6:1-4)

In his vision Isaiah receives a breathtaking glimpse of the beauty, the majesty and glory of God. He hears the angels singing their adoration of God. The song sung in God's presence is simple, 'Holy, holy, holy.' The word 'holy' comes

from the Hebrew word qadowsh, and means perfect, or set apart. The seraphim were acknowledging the perfection, the set apartness of God. God is wholly and utterly different from any other being.

Isaiah feels and glimpses the glory and holiness of God as the ground shakes beneath his feet and smoke billows up. Isaiah does not gaze directly on God, but he does experience the majesty of his presence. That was enough.

Confronted with the beauty and majesty of God, Isaiah is immediately struck by how small and insignificant he is by comparison. More than that, after seeing God's pure perfection, Isaiah is horrified by his own impure imperfection. This is he responded to what he saw and heard:

“Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.”  
(Isaiah 6:5)

Isaiah's prayer illustrates my first point:

### **Conviction Leads to Confession**

In the light of the holiness and perfection of God, Isaiah was convicted of his own imperfection or sinfulness.

Without conviction there can be no confession.

The prophet Jeremiah had an uncanny knack for pointing out uncomfortable truths. Speaking of the human heart he said this:

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?  
(Jeremiah 17:9)

Even before we look to deceive others or even God, human beings have an incredible capacity for self-deceit.

For example, the human heart has the amazing capacity to inflate our goodness and deflate our imperfections.

The authors of the book [\*Mistakes Were Made \(but not by me\)\*](#) argue that our tendency to justify our actions is more powerful and deceptive than an explicit lie. They write.

When researchers asked husbands and wives what percentage of the housework they do, the wives say, "Are you kidding? I do almost everything, at least 90 percent." And the husbands say, "I do a lot, about 40 percent." Although the specific numbers differ from couple to couple, the total always exceeds 100 percent by a significant margin. It's tempting to conclude that one spouse is lying, but it is more likely that each is remembering in a way that enhances his or her contribution.

Over time, as the self-serving distortions of memory kick in ... we come to believe our own lies, little by little. We know we did something wrong, but we gradually begin to think that it wasn't our fault, and after all, the situation was complex. We start underestimating our own responsibility, whittling away at it until it is a mere shadow of its former hulking self.

The human heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.

The human heart inflates our goodness.

The human heart is amazingly creative in finding or creating excuses for otherwise inexcusable behavior.

For example, these are actual excuses offered by motorists pulled over for speeding:

- I had passed out after seeing flashing lights, which I believed to be UFOs in the distance. The flash of the camera brought me round from my trance.
- I was in the airport's flight path and I believe the camera was triggered by a jet overhead, not my car.
- I had a severe bout of diarrhoea and had to speed to a public toilet.
- There was a strong wind behind my car, which pushed me over the limit.
- My friend had just chopped his fingers off and I was rushing the fingers to hospital.
- The vibrations from the surfboard I had on the roof rack set off the camera.
- I had to rush my dying hamster to the vets.
- A violent sneeze caused a chain reaction where my foot pushed down harder on the accelerator.

The human heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.

The human heart looks to shift blame for our actions. It wasn't our fault. We couldn't help it. It was inevitable.

Over the last week we have all been horrified by the terrible, and it seems avoidable tragedy of the Costa Concordia. The questions of why and how are still to be answered, but it would be fair to say that Captain Francesco Schettino has a lot of answers to give. Amidst all the accusations flying around in the aftermath of the disaster is the very serious charge that the Captain abandoned ship well before the last passenger was accounted for. The Captain has reportedly responded to the charges with the excuse that he tripped and fell into a lifeboat out of which it was impossible to climb back out.

Our capacity to shift blame for our actions, or to make excuses goes right back to the earliest story of humanity. In the beginning Adam and Eve were given full dominion over the Paradise known as the Garden of Eden. God instructed them to not eat the fruit of one tree – the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Was God setting some cruel trap? No – God was giving Adam and Eve the opportunity to exercise their free-will. They could choose to love and obey God, or not. They weren't pre-programmed robots. They had the freedom to choose their actions, as do we.

Tragically, Adam and Eve chose to eat from the forbidden tree. As soon as they did they were filled with guilt and shame, emotions they had never experienced before. Eventually God challenges them, asking whether they have eaten the forbidden fruit. Adam's response is damning:

The man said, "The woman you put here with me – she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it."  
(Genesis 3:12)

It's her fault! She made me do it! Of course, we are bit more sophisticated about it now. My genes made me do it. My family upbringing, that made me do it. It was nature, no it was nurture! I had no choice!

God turns to Eve and asks her what she has done:

The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, so I ate."  
(Genesis 3:13)

Ah, the devil made me do it!

Adam and Eve compound their sin by failing to take responsibility for it. *They try to externalize what is an internal, heart issue.*

The human heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.

The human heart denies, diminishes, and blames.

The Anglican Book of Common Prayer summarizes the human condition this way: that all of us are miserable offenders with no spiritual health in us. Such language seems stark, overly negative – unhelpful even.

But this is certainly how the prophet Isaiah understood himself compared to the glorious vision of God he encountered. All of our imperfections are magnified in light of God's perfection.

The Apostle John puts it this way:

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.  
(1 John 1:8)

I know I have laboured this point. I have done so deliberately in the conviction that if you are like me, this is an uncomfortable truth that I try to avoid. But it is a truth we must face if we are to begin a process of spiritual healing.

You see, we are all sinners in need of God's forgiving grace.

Some of you may even be offended. You didn't come to church this morning to be told you're a miserable offender with no spiritual health in you. You think I have painted to bleak a picture of the human condition. Perhaps, but I don't think so. I know that every person in this room has an incredible capacity for good – I get to see that good. But equally true is the fact that all of us are, without exception, like Isaiah, people with unclean lips and sin-stained hearts.

We live in a self-esteem obsessed world. As parents and grand-parents we want our children to grow with a healthy sense of self.

But in the end, true self-esteem is not found in repeatedly telling ourselves how good we are, but in knowing how loved we are. Lasting, eternal self esteem is found only in God.

Conviction leads to confession and:

### **Confession leads to Repentance**

In Shakespeare's famous play, Macbeth, Lady Macbeth is racked with remorse and guilt after participating in a murder conspiracy. In her guilt she imagines bloodstains on her hand which she then desperately tries to scrub out, famously shouting as she does, "Out, damned spot!" The bloodstains were a figment of her imagination, but her guilt was very real.

In 2006 some Canadian scientists released some research into what they call the Macbeth effect, the desire in us to cleanse ourselves of moral impurities. In their study, the researchers asked volunteers to think about immoral acts they had committed in the past—shoplifting, betraying a friend, and so on. The volunteers were then offered an opportunity to clean their hands. According to the results of the study, those who had retraced their sins "jumped at the offer at twice the rate of study subjects who had not imagined past transgressions."

"Out, damned spot!" We desperately want to rid ourselves from the shame or guilt we feel from past mistakes.

Confession flows from the conviction that we have sinned, that we have made mistakes, that we have offended God.

Confession – true and sincere confession – leads to repentance.

Repentance is not a religious word, even though we have come to know it as such. Its origin is ancient biblical a culture where people were essentially nomadic and lived in a world with no maps, no street signs, no Google maps or SatNavs. It was and is easy to get lost walking through the desert. In losing their way, a desert traveler would finally admit, 'I'm lost. I'm going around in circles. I'm going in the wrong direction.'

To repent is first to admit that you are lost; that you are going in the wrong direction. But to admit that you are lost is not enough. That would still leave you in the same mess. After admitting you were lost, the second act of repentance was to then go decisively in another direction.

One of the things I pride myself on is my sense of direction. Usually I have a quick look at a map, work out where I need to go and how to get there and then get there successfully. But sometimes things don't work out according to plan. I miss and exit or a turn off, or take a right instead of a left. And I find myself lost. The hardest thing for me to do, especially if Sue is in the car with me, is to pull off to the side of the road in an admission that I am lost and need to find another route.

Confession is the admission that we are spiritually lost and need to find another way in life. When you are lost, it is never half lost, or quarter lost or a little bit lost. Lost is lost.

To confess and repent is to bring to the surface all the wrong turns we have made and to commit to head in another direction.

The story is told of a shoplifter who writes to a department store and says, "I've just become a Christian, and I can't sleep at night because I feel guilty. So here's \$100 that I owe you."

At the bottom of the letter he signed his name, and then in a little postscript at the bottom he added, "If I still can't sleep, I'll send you the rest."

There are two ways we offer our prayers of confession. The first is to make a general admission that we have failed; that we have failed God and failed others by what we have done or not done. That is a general prayer of confession, and that is OK and valid. But a powerful counterpart is when we take the time to surface and name the specific ways we have sinned – the people we have hurt, the lies we have told, the things left undone that should have been done. There is power in such prayer, not because we are telling God something he doesn't know. God knows all things. The power of such specific prayers of confession is in making ourselves open to the healing, purifying grace of God.

Such prayer is hard. It takes courage. It will hurt. But such prayer is essential to life with God.

In the comic strip Calvin and Hobbes, Calvin says to his tiger friend, Hobbes, "I feel bad that I called Susie names and hurt her feelings. I'm sorry I did it." "Maybe you should apologize to her," Hobbes suggests. Calvin ponders this for a moment and replies, "I keep hoping there's a less obvious solution."

When we want to restore our relationship with God, we need to remember that he has a liking for the obvious solution. The obvious solution is to admit our mistakes as openly and honestly as we can and seek God's forgiveness.

When Roger Barrier left for University, his mother gave him a canvas bag to put his washing in. She instructed him, "Put your dirty clothes in this every night," she said. "At the end of the week, wash them at the Laundromat." Barrier continues:

Seven days later, I took my dirty clothes to the Laundromat. To save a little time, I threw the duffel bag in the washer, put in some laundry powder, inserted the proper change, and turned on the machine. Moments later, a loud "thump, thump, thump, thump" echoed through the Laundromat. A pretty Baylor co-ed approached me with a grin. "I watched you load your washer. I think the clothes would get cleaner if you took them out of the bag."

One day, when my relationship with God was hurting, I remembered my laundry episode. I realized the way I confessed sins—"Dear God, please forgive me for all the sins I've committed today"—was about as effective in cleansing them as my first attempt at washing clothes. Each sin needs individual attention.

I have shared with you that the primary way I pray is through journaling. I have a limited attention span and so I find the discipline of writing my prayers helpful. Regularly I will write out my prayers of confession, naming specific ways I have failed God and others. No one will read these journals until I die! The process of naming and admitting my sins has always led to liberation. The bible says it this way:

Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.  
(Proverbs 28:13)

This leads me to my final point: Conviction leads to confession, confession leads to repentance and:

### **Repentance leads to Restoration**

Experiencing God in all his perfection led Isaiah to be convicted of his imperfection.

Out of his conviction, Isaiah confessed his sinfulness: 'Woe is me!' he cried out. The story does not end there; it continues:

Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."  
(Isaiah 6:6-7)

Fire symbolizes purifying force. The burning coal touches Isaiah's lips and his guilt is taken away and his sins atoned for. What does this mean?

Isaiah recognized his helplessness before God. His sin had created a massive chasm between him and God that he could never cross. God was holy, he was not. God was perfect, he was imperfect. God was pure, he was impure and unclean. There was nothing he could do to bridge this gap. And so God does. The Seraphim come to Isaiah in his misery and purifies his life – removing his guilt. Atonement is God's action in removing the shame and guilt and consequences of our sin. When Isaiah's lips were touched with the fire of God's love his life was restored; his sins were forgiven and his guilt vanquished.

Like Isaiah, between us and God is an un-crossable chasm. God is holy and we are not. We can try in desperation to bridge this gap by trying to be good. But no one is good but God. Apart from God, our situation is hopeless. But with God there is hope.

God has not touched our lives with the fiery heat of a coal carried by an angel. He has done something much more spectacular. The Apostle Paul writes this in Romans:

God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.  
(Romans 3:25)

At the first Christmas God bridged the gap created by sin between us and him. For God so loved the world that he gave his son. Jesus did what we can never do; he lived a perfect life. His death on the cross paid the price for our sins we could not pay.

Conviction leads to Confession. Confession leads to Repentance. Repentance leads to Restoration.

In repenting of our sins we admit that we are lost and that the only direction we can turn is towards God. And when we turn towards God we discover that God is, has and always will be turned towards us. God touches our lives with the Cross and our sins are forgiven. The Apostle John says this:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

(1 John 1:9)

In the novel *Christ Recrucified*, there is a scene in which four men confess their sins to one another. One of the men, Michelis, cries out, "How can God let us live on the earth? Why doesn't he kill us to purify creation?" "Because, Michelis," another answered, "God is a potter; he works in mud."

God works in the muck and mess and mud of our lives and with his love forms it into something beautiful.

## **PRAY**

Sometimes no one ever really knows what lurks beneath until things get a good shake. An April earthquake in the region of the Solomon Islands shook loose a World War II torpedo boat which had rested on the ocean floor for over 60 years. The boat's hull was intact—explosives and all. A bomb unit was deployed to detonate the torpedoes safely. Experts believe the PT boat is just one of many pieces of military wreckage that pepper the coastline of the islands. This piece is particularly fascinating in that it's the same variety of military craft U.S. President John F. Kennedy commanded. Jay Waura of the National Disaster Management Office said, "We were amazed by this finding, as previously this wreckage had long been sitting under the sea and rusting in peace without anyone knowing about it."

I was running a few weeks ago when something snapped in my left hip. One minute I was loping along, the next I was yelping in pain. I had to hobble home.

Within days, that tiny hairline break at the top of my femur threw my entire body off. My left hip hurt, sure, but so did the right one. When I biked, my knee started screaming. By the time I was evaluated by a physical therapist, I was hugging banisters to negotiate stairs, trading heels for sneakers, and chugging Aleve.

What in the world was happening?

"Compensation," said the therapist. My right hip hurt because I was covering for the injury in the left one. Likewise, my left knee hurt from diverting stress on my hip. The entire band of muscle stretching from my left hip to my knee had even tightened to protect the injury.

How like sin in our lives. You think one broken area isn't a problem, but you soon find yourself covering for it, and before you know it you are suffering in other areas as well. Sin always requires "compensation."