

Thursday 27th August 2020

“Jesus said to His disciples, “It is inevitable that stumbling blocks will come...

...Watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. Even if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times returns to say, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.”

Luke 17:1-3

Around 30 years ago, I found myself in a position where I was falling prey to the same problematic behaviour time and again. Then, one night, I discovered the short poem ‘Poison Pools’ by Adrian Plass.

Who made these poison pools

In desert lands

So sweet and cool?

A welcome lie

A chance to die with water on my lips.

I’ve seen how others try to die unpoisoned in the sun.

I do not think that I can do as they have done.

The image of sin as a cool, welcoming but ultimately poisonous pool has stayed with me ever since.

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, first published in 1950, at a time when war-time rationing of sweets was still in force, C.S. Lewis used a different but equally tantalising image as the White Witch offered exotic Turkish delight to ensnare Edmund.

Jesus used a different metaphor for sin which would have resonated just as well with his audience. In Luke (17:1-3), Matthew (18:6-9) and Mark (9:42-48), we come across the same passage repeated almost word for word.

“Jesus said to His disciples, “It is inevitable that stumbling blocks will come...”

If you ever wondered what a stumbling block is, the Greek word used here is “skandalon”. The word means either the trigger or bait on a snare (think of the bit of cheese on a mouse-trap) or sometimes a bit of rock sticking up out of the stony desert ground. Just as you are happily walking along in your sandaled shoes, out of nowhere you stub your toe or fall head first. (That idea of something that trips you up or traps you is obviously where we get the modern word “scandal”).

Jesus recognises the weakness of man. There are stumbling blocks everywhere we turn and we will trip over them again and again and again. As Paul says (Rom. 9:17), *“For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing.”*

So, how does Jesus tell us to act when someone we know trips up?

Firstly, we are to look out for each other and be prepared to call out sinful behaviour when we see it (*“If your brother sins, rebuke him”*). However inevitable it is that we fall prey to it, sin is sin is sin.

Secondly, forgive those who are truly penitent (*“if he repents, forgive him”*). That should come as no surprise – it is a key tenet of Jesus’ teaching that repentance merits forgiveness.

Finally, keep on forgiving. This is the tricky one. Often we might find it a real struggle to forgive someone (even once) if what they have done has harmed us. Then, when we see them commit the same offence over again we either think that they were not truly penitent in the first place or we take umbrage that the act of forgiveness that we offered has been trampled on by the offender.

But Jesus has none of that and says that if someone *“seven times returns to say, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.”*

We need to put aside any notion that we can avoid sinful behaviour just by trying harder. The only true release from sin comes through Christ. Looking down on others whom we see repeatedly falling, thinking ourselves superior to them and deciding that they do not merit forgiveness is the attitude which Jesus condemns in the Pharisee (Luke 18:9-14), implying as it does that righteousness can come through our own works and not through grace. Thinking we can do it on our own makes us as ridiculous as the man trying to pull himself up by his own bootstraps.

If only we were able to keep in mind how easily we ourselves are likely to trip up and fall, we might find it easier to forgive others whenever they do so and repent of their actions.