

ST. THOMAS EPISCOPAL CHURCH
KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE
The Great Vigil of Easter, Year A
April 24, 2011 – 6:45 A.M.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY SIN? (Romans 6:3-11)
Howard Bowlin+

“Whatever became of sin?” That is a question that was once asked by the great psychiatrist Karl Menninger. He was involved in a discussion with some of his colleagues regarding human behavior. As I have heard the story, each person at the meeting was advancing his favorite psychological theory in an attempt to explain why we human beings do some of the harmful, self-destructive acts with which we are all familiar.

It was a spirited discussion, as the story has come down. But out of the many voices and many opinions came that singular voice, “Whatever became of sin?”

Sin doesn’t get a lot of play anymore. That’s too bad—it’s a perfectly good and honorable doctrine of the Christian church. But we, humanity, have learned a very great deal about human behavior in the past two thousand years. We’ve learned much about physical and psychological causes for disruptive and antisocial behavior.

We’ve learned how families work and how congregations mirror and live out how our families interact among themselves. (I once spent nine months of continuing education time and money working on that one.)

We indeed have learned much—but apparently we haven’t learned it all; the behavior continues. Is that Dr. Menninger’s voice I hear: “Whatever became of sin?”

Saint Paul held out little hope for any of us apart from the salvation to be found in Jesus. Elsewhere in the Epistle to the Romans, he wrote: “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”

I think that most of us have, at one time or another, had a thought that goes something like this: “I have often struggled with the thought that God created me like this, put me in a family situation which programmed me in certain ways while I was too young to question, surrounded me with all kinds of temptations, then gets mad at me when I act the way I do. What’s with that!?! If this were a criminal case, I’d plead entrapment!”

If that were the end of the story, we’d have some justification for those thoughts. And, most surely, we’d all be in a lot of trouble. Early this morning, however, as we gather to welcome this Easter morning, we hear the rest of the story. The Epistle Lesson reminds us that Christ’s death and resurrection makes a profound and indissoluble difference in our lives.

I think God understands us better than the “victim” role that I outlined earlier (i.e., we are created, tempted, and condemned by a capricious deity). Rather, God is sympathetic with my (and your) plight. It’s just that he wants the best for us, as we do for our children. He is patient, (“long-suffering” is the word that Holy Scripture uses). God gives us the benefit of the doubt. He leaves us free to make our way, always near when needed, makes allowances for some of our intellectual and spiritual disadvantages, and in a word, loves us.

Saint Paul was right, of course, but his main point, that by joining ourselves to Christ we can have a better life, is where our hope lies. Because of what Paul has written here

and other teachings of the Bible, we know where we stand. We know we're to resist those temptations, try to be better than we are, make restitution and apology when we're wrong, and understand there are certain prices to pay for wrongdoing. As long as we're trying to follow Christ Jesus and to be what we understand God wants us to be, it will "be well with my soul."