

# Sermon Notes

St Mark's Anglican Church  
South Hurstville

Epiphany 5

4 February 2007

Preacher

The Reverend Chris Albany

Rector

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Readings: Isaiah 6.1-8; Psalm 138; 1 Corinthians 15. 1-11; Luke 5.1-11

## The gift of pain and sin

The holiday season is over. School has recommenced this week; the choir is back after its post-Christmas break. Some have been fortunate enough to go away and have a holiday, no doubt returning refreshed and energised for the year ahead. Others haven't been so fortunate, continuing to work away – so much so that several people this week have already said the year is galloping away. I can't believe it is February already; where has January gone? So those returning refreshed please be sensitive to those who haven't had a break, and who might identify with the character in a Cheney cartoon I was given during the week.

It shows a man walking towards the corner of a building with high brick walls. The man has obviously been mugged; he's sporting a black eye, clothes are dishevelled and the brief case he is carrying is hanging open empty. He's been bashed and robbed. The culprit is a big burly man walking away behind him with a baseball bat over his shoulder and with January written on his T-shirt. What the poor man can't see is that approaching around the corner he is about to get to is another even larger man, this one carrying a sledge hammer over one shoulder and a chain in his other hand. This man also has a word written across his T-shirt – February!

Life is a bit like that at times isn't it? It can be rather bruising. I am tempted to think sometimes that it would be nice if there were no such thing as pain, suffering, distress. If everything could be smooth sailing, sweetness and light. A pain-free life, wouldn't that be lovely? Well, actually, no! As one who suffers from congenital analgesia will tell you. Congenital analgesia is the complete lack of the ability to feel pain. You see, pain is the body's defence mechanism, it tells us that something is wrong or harmful. It triggers mental problem solving strategies that seek to end the painful experience and it promotes learning, making repetition of the painful situation less likely. Neurophysiologist Robert Coghill says pain is the body's smoke alarm. Victims of congenital analgesia hurt themselves without knowing it, bending their joints to the point of tearing ligaments, or walking on damaged bone until it breaks. They usually die by the time they are in their 30's from injuries they never felt, bodies scarred from head to toe. So thank God for pain or at least the ability to perceive it.

All of us carry wounds, from the experience of life, mostly hidden behind carefully constructed exteriors; be those wounds and the associated pain caused by injury, sickness, or the actions of ourselves or others. They are part and parcel of being less than perfect in this universe of accident, and freedom, and pain – the only environment we have in which to live and experience and respond to the love of God. To put it in religious or theological terms it is the consequence of our sinfulness and the sinfulness of the world. Understanding sin with its original meaning of falling short. A falling short of the perfection and ability to love that is potentially there.

All this thinking about pain and sin and suffering has been sparked off by an article in the **West Australian** Gwen Cartwright brought back from her recent trip to Perth. The writer, Norman Aisbett, is reporting on a visit to Perth by the Franciscan and Spiritual worker, Richard Rohr ofm. Commenting on the fact that all of us have been wounded in some way by life, the article says the key is not to deny it and then quotes Richard Rohr, saying,

*"I always say that the way you can tell if your religion is healthy is by what you do with your pain, what you do with your woundedness; and that if you do not transform it, if you religion is not*

*helping you to transform it, you will with 100% certitude, transmit it,” he says.*

*“We have a huge transmission of pain in your country and our country because our religion on the popular level is not doing its job very well at all. So our wounds mostly do not turn into ‘sacred wounds’, where we see God in them, but they just become a new excuse for bitterness and scapegoating and hatred.”*

*Father Rohr also teaches that sin is actually suffering; and that God pities it rather than hates it. Another liberating idea.*

*“That changes everything from fear-based religion to the power of the In-dwelling Spirit to transform us and to use our very sin to bring us to God, which is the meaning of the Cross; God using sin to redeem the world. God teaching us how to use the mistakes for the journey to God.*

*“Now that’s Gospel. That’s good news because that’s the only journey that any of us are ever going to be capable of anyway and this pretending that we can be above sin, beyond sin, will not fail, has just created a lot of split, dissociated human beings, often living in major illusion about themselves.”*

Sin like pain; or at least awareness of sin, seen in this light is something positive. It is important to make that distinction between “sin” itself and the awareness of it. Sin is always negative; its effects are destructive, corrosive. It diminishes us as individuals, causes harm to others, the environment; it is destructive of relationships. Most of us most of the time are acutely aware of our shortcomings-our failures. We know when our words and actions are less than they might be. Our conscience informs us and often prevents us from acting inappropriately. When it doesn’t we feel guilt or shame – emotional or psychic pain. Just as there are people who do not feel pain so there are some people who have a poorly formed or non-existent conscience to help them decide whether an action is right or wrong, good or bad. We even give names to such people saying they are “pathological liars” or “kleptomaniacs” recognising that at least they suffer from an illness or disability. There are those who equally seem to have no sense of guilt or shame and who find it difficult to conform to the norms of society, such as their lack of inhibition for example. So in terms of awareness of sin, conscience and guilt/shame are key concepts.

Conscience guides us in a preventative way, stops us from hurting ourselves, others or relationships. Guilt/shame tells us that something is wrong and can lead us to seek ways to end or not repeat the painful experience. Richard Rohr talks about the Spirit of God using our sin to bring us to God. God teaching us how to use the mistakes for the journey to God. We can only do that if we have awareness of our guilt or shame. We see something of what Richard Rohr is talking about in today’s readings. Isaiah expresses a sense of guilt and uncleanness;

*“Woe is me, 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 of Hosts.”*

Paul in the epistle reading says,

*“.....for I am the least of the Apostles and do not even deserve to be called an Apostle,”*

and Peter in that scene from the Sea of Galilee after the great catch of fish says,

*“.....depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.”*

Each in their own way acutely aware of their sinfulness, of their inadequacy to be used by God and yet it is precisely as they express that, that God takes them and commissions them and uses them. It is as if we need first to acknowledge our inadequacy that we can’t do it on our own – that we need support and help from others and from God. Indeed, isn’t it true that those who try to do it all themselves are the ones who are most likely to fall on their faces?

I suspect that means that we shouldn’t be so afraid to admit our shortcomings and failures, at least to ourselves and to God and to those we trust. To be more in touch and open about the things we feel guilt or shame about. To allow our awareness to bring us to God and to find the way to change and transform ourselves, within God’s people, more and more into the likeness of God which is our destiny.