

Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father

In the name etc.

I wonder: what is your earliest memory? It is quite possible that it is not a good one. It is said that as children we very rarely remember the times when we have been made to feel happy- even if that was the norm in our childhood- but we will always remember the times when we were made to feel one emotion in particular: ashamed.

One moment sticks out from my childhood. I was not, as you may be unsurprised to know, a particularly obedient or well-behaved little boy. Causing trouble was one of my primary objectives and, one sunny afternoon, when faced with the prospect of a task at school- I forget exactly what- that I didn't want to do. So I went to the corner of the school gymnasium and I pressed the fire alarm.

Dutifully the school, from the tiniest member of the nursery to the headmaster himself, trooped out. Initially there were obvious signs of panic: it hadn't been a planned fire alarm, obviously. I began to feel ashamed at what I had done. This was compounded as it became clear that time was wasted, that people were worried. It sticks out in my memories of childhood precisely because shame is such a powerful emotion.

It is a powerful emotion and it is at the centre of our powerful gospel.

What do you associate with the word shame? For some it will be a very difficult personal thing, for some it will be largely something confined to memory, for some people it relates to the life of community. We can be ashamed of ourselves, ashamed of our family or our friends, ashamed of our neighbours or our nation, ashamed, even, of our Church.

Shame is in two parts of our Gospel today. Firstly, it looms in the form of the cross.

The cross was not a nice thing. It was designed to degrade and shame the person who hung on it as much as possible. The victim was stripped, not to a pair of dinky imagined boxers as art suggests, but naked. Nails were driven into hands and feet and wrists and ankles. Slowly, their chest collapsed in on itself. It wasn't just designed to put someone to death, it was designed to humiliate them whilst it did so, designed to perpetuate shame.

It is important to remember that pain, and we will on Good Friday. But it is important to note that the cross, in that form, failed. It no longer perpetuates shame. The cross now, to us, is a thing of hope. A thing in which we glory. The opposite of shame. Taking up the cross- the cross that was supposed to be a thing of shame- is the way in which we can in fact *free* ourselves of shame, liberate ourselves from sin. Another question then: what does the cross mean to you?

In Lent in particular, I would suggest that the cross poses us a challenge. Yes, it asks us to find the true meaning of that which we value but it also asks us to embrace and to name the things of which we are ashamed. It promises us that they can be transformed,

can be forgiven. It too stood as an emblem of shame, but by being taken up and its name invoked, it was transformed. It became a sign of hope. And as we heard with sin and wrong last week, it is by the naming of it, the taking up of it, that we free ourselves of its power. Because that is the thing about shame, it isn't meant to last forever.

And that is where the second shame comes in. The part of the gospel where Jesus says he will be ashamed of us makes for difficult hearing. Crucially though, he says it is those who are ashamed of him whom the Son of Man will also be ashamed of when he comes in glory. Our challenge- our direct challenge from Jesus- is to not live as prisoners of shame. He cannot free us from that shame if we are ashamed of him.

Once again, it is by naming shame that we rob it of its power. We are called once again to acknowledge and then hand over those things of which we are ashamed. To be no longer defined by them. That is what Jesus is saying when he sets up this difficult verse: for us to make forgiveness possible, we first have to free ourselves of those things which weigh us down.

As with the cross, Jesus can then bear it, and by so doing can then free us to be embraced by him for who we are, known by him for who we are, loved by him for who we are. Freeing ourselves of shame and its power is a precursor to acknowledging the greatest truth of all: that God loves us.

Once again we see that an honesty is at the heart of Lent. Another question is posed to us by this season: what areas of life- individual, community, church, national- might we need to be more honest about?

Back to the fire alarm at the school in Kent 25 years ago. It was at the exact moment that I was most ashamed that I was inspired to do something brave. It became clear that someone had pressed the alarm, and so we were asked who it was. In front of the school, I stood up and admitted it had been me.

I don't tell you this to emphasise what a brave little boy I was- as I have made clear that was very far from the case. Nor do I suggest that our little moments of bravery come close to the great sacrifice of Christ. But I would suggest that it tells a very simple truth. It illustrates that- paradoxically- shame can itself be the urge to put shame aside. If it is hidden, surprised, not named- it, like wrong last week, gain in power- if, however it is named, faced, acknowledged, then its power can be broken.

That is what Christ calls us to do: to name our shame, and to know that it no longer has power over us, that by him and by his cross, it is transformed into life and into love. Naming shame, admitting we have things to be ashamed of: well that, combined with a reliance on Christ and his cross, is the process that can make us shame-less.

And we know that people who are shame-less are like. They do strange and brave and unusual things. They put themselves at risk, they love more freely. Think of something this Lent- something which you might be inspired to do that pushes the boundaries of that love, that speaks of a life where you are not ashamed of Christ crucified. What will knowing this, owning this, believing this inspire you to do?