

True confessions

Readings: Psalm 32, James 5:13 – 16, Luke 5:27 – 32

True confessions is a magazine that began in 1922. Around two million young women bought it each week during the 1930s. It's still going strong and is full of peoples' apparently real life circumstances. Here's a sample of articles in a recent issue: Second Chance Summer, Our Hearts Aligned, and On-line Lover. Honest confessions? Maybe; maybe not.

Here's another confession that begins like this:

Now – here is my secret.

It tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God – that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love as I seem beyond being able to love.¹

Which is more likely to be genuine?

Actually the second one is made by a fictional character in a novel. Never-the-less it has the ring of truth doesn't it. It could be made by anyone genuinely struggling with life.

As human beings, we have a deep-seated need to authentically love and make deep connections with others and with God. Those connections happen as we learn over time to be honest and to openly 'confess', or reveal, something of who we are to others. That can only happen when we feel safe and know that we'll be accepted, not judged.

And we'll only be able to be honest with others if we have taken some time to genuinely know and accept ourselves; especially the bits we'd rather weren't there.

Back in the 60s and 70s everything was very clear. We memorised scriptures like: All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Romans 3:23

Then we jumped to the conclusion, that God was so angry, he needed to kill Jesus in order for our relationship with him to be restored. We'd quote Romans 6:23 at this point: For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.

Of course we have all sinned and we do all fall short of God's perfection. We know it.

But does that mean that God turned his back on us? Does it mean that if we don't confess each individual sin, big or how small, that we can have no relationship with God? And what about the sins we don't know about?

If we don't confess, are we dead in sin; permanently separated from God? Or is confession about more than that?

This is controversial territory folks.

¹ Douglas Coupland, *Life After God* (New York: Pocket Books, 1994) pg 359

I'm absolutely convinced that God never turns away from us; regardless of how bad we are. But that doesn't mean our relationship isn't affected.

The Psalmist writes when he refused to confess his sin, his body wasted away and he groaned all day long. That sounds like an acute fit of the guilts to me.

He thinks God's was punishing him but maybe he was under a cloud of his own making; one he couldn't shake? When he does confess, he feels a sense of freedom and lightness. He can accept the Lord's forgiveness and his guilt is gone.

Now I wonder if the Lord had already forgiven him. I wonder if he was already free. Maybe his confession set him free to accept that forgiveness and freedom.

The psalmist then advise everyone to confess, so they won't be drowned in the floodwaters of judgment.

What if those floodwaters of judgement don't come from God at all but from our own sense of guilt and shame?

Confession to God sets us free to receive God's love and grace and mercy. When we're weighed down with guilt and shame, we can't receive that love, not because God doesn't want to give it. God has already poured out love and forgiveness in Christ. We simply have to receive it.

Confession opens the door for us to receive God's grace; he has already forgiven us!

My dear children, I am writing this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate who pleads our case before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who is truly righteous. He himself is the sacrifice that atones for our sins—and not only our sins but the sins of all the world. 1 John 2:1 – 2

That's what absolution is. It is a reminder from someone else; that God has already forgiven us in Christ.

In the Anglican context that someone is usually a priest. Does it need to be? Perhaps for some, an ordained Priest carries more authority, but we heard last Sunday that we are all priests in God's house of living stones. 1 Peter 2:5

Confession allows us to receive what has already been granted in Christ – pardon; forgiveness.

Let's turn to our reading from James. He tells us to confess our sins to each other. Turn to your neighbour and do that now.

Just kidding! Anyone feeling freaked out about now?

I wonder if James isn't saying what I just said though. Confession brings freedom and healing. We are to pray for each other, as priests and fellow Christians, so that a sometimes overwhelming sense of guilt is gone and we can receive forgiveness. All Christians have the authority to pray for that sense of release from guilt and to remind us of Christ's forgiveness.

Seriously have you ever confessed your sin to someone else; someone completely trustworthy obviously? Maybe it's not a regular practice but there are times when this can be really helpful. I can recall one time I received a sense of peace that I wasn't able to receive confessing by myself.

Not all churches practice confession in terms of a public confession. Anglicans, Catholics, Lutherans, Orthodox Church folk do. And we always confess before Communion.

Why?

Even when we do confess some of our flaws and bad habits remain. The Bible calls that our 'sinful nature'.

Paul talks about this in Romans 7. Our sinful nature is not dealt a death blow when we come to faith in Christ. It no longer drives everything we do but our sinful nature continues to exert a powerful influence on us. However it no longer has full sway. God sees us in Christ.

We confess our sin before Communion to remind us that we are free. The Lord has forgiven us. We are free to come to his table and receive grace and mercy from Christ.

We know that we are created in God's image. We know that we are loved by God and created for relationship with him even though our sinful nature hasn't been completely destroyed.

In Christ we are being transformed from day to day, into the people we are created to be.

Don't copy the behaviour and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Romans 12:2

Jesus coped very well with human imperfection; with sin. He spent his time hanging around with people who weren't part of acceptable society because of their lifestyles. The New Living Translations puts verse 30 like this:

But the Pharisees and their teachers of religious law complained bitterly to Jesus' disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with such scum?"

Jesus looked past the surface then and now. He created of all things (Col 1:15 & 16) and created us good. He know God's image in us is marred now. Yet his response is to reach out in love, through the cross, with his time, friendship, with his love and forgiveness.

Question Is forgiveness dependant on repentance?

Ours isn't. We pray "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Jesus didn't say we were to pray "We forgive those who sin against us when they say sorry."

Jesus response to the religious lot was: "I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners and need to repent."

Perhaps we need to repent of corporate sin too.

In church we make our confession every week. Through the week we confess often I'm sure. That's good. I wonder though if we should focus on our corporate sin as well and not just individual acts or omissions or attitudes.

We are part of the human race. We share the goodness of community and we share some of society's blindness to injustice. What do you think we are blind to?

Is that blindness just ignorance or is it deliberate sin? Do we choose blindness at times so that we can continue on with our own comfortable lifestyles?

Plenty to ponder.

The more I have prayerfully considered confession, the more I suspect that it isn't about receiving forgiveness which has been withheld until we do confess. Rather it is about clearing the path so we can receive the forgiveness, the acceptance, the love, grace and mercy, which has already been given to us in Christ.

The blood of Jesus, which cleanses us from all sin, is effective in its work. We are made clean because of who he is. Confession reminds us to accept that forgiveness which is so freely offered.

True confessions simply open a door for Christ to walk through. The children's book entitled "Sorry" is aimed at helping toddlers make their confessions. It finishes up with a declaration "Thank you God that you love me all the time and for ever. Amen"

Reflection questions:

- Can you recall a time when you felt weighed down with guilt? What helped relieve that sense of guilt?
- Have you ever confessed your sin to someone else? How did that go?
- What comfort do you find in knowing that Jesus came to earth for sinners, not the already righteous?
- What do you think about corporate sin eg defiling the earth, colluding in unjust economic or political or even religious systems?