

11th August 2024 – Daniel 9 ‘Daniel’s Prayer – The Value Of Confession’

If you stop to think for a moment, which parts of a church service mean the most to you? Perhaps it’s the sermon, or the chance to share bread wine (call it what you will, communion, mass, eucharist, Lord’s Supper); perhaps it’s the music, or the chance to pray. Perhaps it’s listening to the great language of the bible or the liturgy that creates a sense of the greatness of God; perhaps it’s the energy and joy of being together. It could be most or all of those things. I wonder, for how many of you, the chance to confess would be near the top of that list?

Certainly, if you look around the modern Western church, confession as part of the main weekly service is becoming increasingly rare. Or, it’s used, but in a way where we don’t actually say sorry, more something like ‘the world’s not quite right is it?’ You know the sort of thing I mean! But this tendency to reduce the value of confession probably says more about us and our culture than it does about the development of faith. **Confession has been part of the life of the church since the beginning.** St James tells us to ‘confess your sins to each other’ in his New Testament letter, and the earliest examples of church practice include confession as part of public worship.

Certainly the Book of Common Prayer, which is still the official liturgy of the Church of England goes large on confession. If you use morning and evening prayer you’ll say it twice a day (or 730 times a year), and it is, shall we say, most thorough: “*we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep, we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts, we have offended against thy holy laws, we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done. And there is no health in us.*” Miserable offender! As my old boss put it, when you use the old prayer book, you are properly confessed.

Maybe the prayer book goes too far for our modern tastes – but I’m not sure Daniel would agree. Today we look at his great prayer in ch9, and at its heart it is a prayer of confession. Daniel has taken on board the prophetic warning that God’s judgement would last 70 years, and, in the first year of Darius’ reign, they’re coming up to that point, if you date the judgement from the first conquest of Israel in 607BC (there were effectively two more, in 596, and 586, so it could still be another 20 years away). Daniel perceives that, while there has been much soul-searching and self-pity, there hasn’t been a lot of real repentance, as he says in v13: ‘all this disaster has come upon us, yet we have not sought the favour of the Lord our God by turning from our sins and giving attention to your truth.’

So, he takes it upon himself to confess and repent on behalf of all of God’s people. There is a lot of debate about this, and there’s not time to explore this in detail today. Jeremiah – a contemporary of Daniel – declares that each person is responsible for their own sin, so it’s probably best to see this prayer of Daniel as a unique example, and for our purposes, to look at what it teaches each of us about the value of confession today.

And let’s start where Daniel starts: with shame. Again that’s a word which has a bad reputation nowadays. We’re told that shame is something we shouldn’t feel, that it’s bad for us. However, the problem we have with shame is not shame itself, it’s *misdirected* shame. Lots of people feel shame about their body, or their image, or their status, or their lack of achievement – and the bible tells us that these are things that we *shouldn’t* feel ashamed about. We are all uniquely made and loved for who we are. No-one can or should make us feel shame for any of these things, and in those circumstances, we need to receive God’s voice telling us otherwise.

Unfortunately, too many people nowadays throw the baby out with the bathwater, and don’t feel shame for things we *should* feel ashamed of – namely our sin. To feel shame for our sin is entirely right and healthy,

because it reminds us that we are moral, spiritual beings who know better – who know that we have a higher calling, a better life to live, ultimately that we are made in the image of God. And so Daniel prays, right near the start: (v7) ‘Lord you are righteous, but this day we are covered with shame.’ Why? ‘Because of our unfaithfulness to you.’ At its heart, sin is unfaithfulness – it’s like having two lovers – God and ourselves.

So the first thing we learn about confession is that it starts with healthy, and properly directed shame. This in turn leads us to the second thing, which is to listen. The great failing of God’s people is that they don’t listen to God and those he appoints to share his thoughts. As Daniel says: (v6) ‘We have not listened to your servants the prophets.’ To repent, to turn around, to change, we first have to listen. To listen to that voice telling us that we’re not on the right track – whether that’s generally or in some area of our lives, or something that we’ve said, done or thought. To listen to what God thinks about it, what he’s designed as the better way. Those who have ears to hear, let them hear, Jesus said – and he’s making the point that all spiritual renewal and change starts with the simple act of listening.

So, healthy shame, active listening – and **then that leads to true confession.** And confession is exactly what it says on the tin: we name all that stuff that we’ve done wrong, or said, or *not* done and said. Yes, it’s fine to use set prayers and general language; but Daniel is very specific, he describes what he needs to confess in particular ways: we’ve rebelled, we’ve turned away, we’ve not listened, we’ve been unfaithful, we’ve not kept God’s laws, we’ve refused to obey, we’ve been inattentive to truth. It’s why I always allow a time of silence before using a set prayer so we can name specific things on our hearts. Whilst it’s not a slot machine or a shopping list, it’s good to confess specific things, so we can receive forgiveness and cleansing just as specifically and thoroughly.

And that’s the point – why do we do this? Because it’s good for us; it’s good for our soul. We confess in order to be forgiven, to be put right with God, with ourselves and with others. It’s not something we can fix by ourselves – what puts things right is God’s mercy. As Daniel says: (v9) ‘The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him.’ He forgives not because of who we are, but because of who He is: ‘the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love.’ A covenant is an unbreakable promise: and God chooses to keep loving us and forgiving us because *that’s who He is.*

He also forgives us for the sake of his own name. That’s not arrogant, by the way – only God can rightly think like that – but it reminds us that how we live reflects on him. In one sense, all people of faith are hypocrites, because we can never be perfect this side of heaven, so we will continue to sin. On the other hand, we do aspire to be better than what’s around us: more loving, more gentle, more kind, more joyful, more self-controlled. Every time a well-known Christian falls badly, people draw negative conclusions about God or faith and Daniel makes this point here – indeed he asks God to forgive, not just for us but also for him: ‘because your city and your people bear your name.’ That’s not necessarily a prayer we should use often, but it reminds us that there’s more at play than our own wellbeing.

But, as I conclude, it is good for us as well. That’s why the church has always practised it and valued it. I recently read a book called ‘Confession – the Healing of the Soul’ – and I think the book’s title captures it perfectly. Actually, most of the rest of the book wasn’t quite as good as the title! But there is one quote near the end which captures the true power and value of confession very well: ‘True confession becomes the encounter with the person we really are... The spiritual self is crucified daily in the midst of everyday cares, worries and failures. Confession is the means by which we are restored to our birthright – the abyss of love from which we were created.’ I love that last phrase: **the abyss of love – a deep well whose depths can never be plummeted. The well out of which forgiveness springs.** This is the well we come to every time we confess. May God grant us grace to drink deeply of this well today, and every day. Confession truly is good for the soul. Amen.