

Small bad habits

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 Psalm 22:23-31 Romans 4:13-25 Mark 8:31-38

³¹Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

³⁴He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those 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 with the holy angels." (Mark 8 : 27-38 NRSV)

Those of you who were here last week may remember that Rebecca's Lent 1 sermon was mainly about repentance. She used the simile of someone driving along a highway, but getting further and further away from where they were supposed to be going. After stubbornly insisting that of course they knew where they were going, they finally had to realise and admit that they were lost, make a U-turn and start coming back.

Now, I had two reactions to this simile. One was to think it was pretty good. Repentance usually does involve that kind of a realisation and admission, along with, perhaps, some contrition about one's role and stupidity thus far, and perhaps some trepidation about what happens if I keep on going on in the same clearly wrong direction. Repentance does involve a concrete decision to change direction and turn around. So far so good.

But my other reaction, though, was to think, "Oh, if only it were as easy as turning around and driving my car comfortably back down the freeway." So today, on the second Sunday in Lent, it is maybe appropriate to zoom in on making a successful journey back. It is one thing to decide I want to change, and quite another to actually do it, and to make it stick.

Fortunately for me, I recently heard a talk on a key to this topic. This was about habits, particularly small, bad habits by Matthew Steenberg, a deacon in the Orthodox church, who has a particular interest in taking the words of the early church fathers and putting them in a practical context and is generally excellent. So if in this sermon I suddenly seem to have acquired an encyclopaedic knowledge of early saints, you can put your minds at rest. I have simply, and somewhat shamelessly, cadged a fair bit of his material. If you want to download it yourselves, Matthew Steenberg's excellent talk *Defeating the slavery of 'Bad Habits'* can be found at

http://ancientfaith.com/podcasts/holyfathers/defeating_the_slavery_of_bad_habits. I strongly

encourage you to do that, or I'd be happy to run a copy off on CD for those who don't have internet access.

A good starting point is that when we repent, when we decide to change, it is often because some aspect of our lives has become so obviously awry that even we eventually decide "this has to change" and we acquire a genuine commitment to say "no more". Think: "I have to stop lashing out at people in fits of rage". Or: "I have become obese, I have to lose weight."

But, as even 5 minutes watching reality TV weight loss programs like 'The Biggest Loser' will confirm, usually the reason why we have come to a specific repentance moment point is because of a long history of behaviours and habits. Most of our big problems have emerged progressively, and their historic course has usually sapped our willpower, and is hard to reverse. So suddenly making a decision, however genuine and worthy – for example "I don't want to be obese any more" – is often not of itself going to mean instant or lasting change. As many failed dieters will attest, mere acts of willpower may be an important part of a solution, but a simple, frontal assault rarely works on a lasting basis.

If it is any consolation, this is not just a problem for us modern people. The testimony of countless saints down the years attests that very serious Christians have been confronting similar issues since the earliest times. Even St Paul, long after his famous and somewhat magical conversion, still famously said that: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want to do, but I do the very thing I hate." (Romans 7:15) Oh yes.

Perhaps for that very reason, the church has a lot of wisdom on subject if you go looking for it. An important insight is that one of the most fruitful places to look when we get serious about repentance is, as I have suggested already, to look closely at our small bad habits. That tendency to tell little white lies; the pattern of inner indulgence of resentments when we are crossed, because of course we never intend to act on it, do we?; reaching for that donut at morning tea because surely one donut can't hurt, can it? And so on.

Here are five reasons for this focus on small habits:

- First, we often don't even notice our bad habits, or when we do we don't really acknowledge that they are bad, or we underestimate them
- Second, they work like shackles and they create the conditions for the big problems
- Third, they rob us of our moral freedom
- Fourth, we can start to mistake them for real us.
- Fifth, they give us a practical material to work with.

Let's begin with my claim that we tend not to notice, or that we underestimate, our small bad habits. Most of us probably do acknowledge or even 'own' our obvious flaws or faults. But surely we are far less ready to do this with our small habits? Those little patterns can seem almost natural: of rushing to judgements about people; of talking too quickly; of being too gossipy; of being overly inquisitive; or looking for plausible excuses for putting off what should be done, for example. To the extent we even notice our habits at this level we are usually all too ready to excuse them, or downplay them as being but little things. "To err is human", people say. "For better or worse, that's just the way I am." Oh really?

Following this line, it becomes easier to see how our habits operate as shackles. All those little habits together, like Lilliputians working on a sleeping Gulliver, can be pretty effective tying us down so that when we start to wake up, we find we can't move. Little by little, we can find our lives almost operating in autopilot. When certain conditions occur, we behave

like lab rats running down conditioned pathways. Why am I here mindlessly wandering around shops – again? Oh, I was bored – again. Why am I lashing out at this person – again? Oh, I was in a fey mood and feeling self righteous – again.

As a nineteenth century Russian saint, Ignaty Brianchaninov puts it with admirable bluntness: “Immoral habits are like shackles: They deprive man of his moral freedom, and forcibly keep him in the stinking swamp of the passions.”

That idea of “moral freedom” is one of the reasons why all of this stuff about habits matters. Our Christian theology is that man was originally born with free will. That is man’s primary nature before the Fall. Even more, we believe that our personal transformation is towards a complete and perfect freedom in God. While we like to think we have free will, and we still do up to a point, our habits are the perfect hidden agents, the fifth column so to speak, for compromising this.

One of the greatest teachers in the church, St John Chrysostom, whose name means “golden mouthed”, put it perhaps even more succinctly back in the fourth century: “There is no tyranny so unbearable as a habit; it is with reason that it is to be called a second nature.”

All my little habits are indeed tyrants. They are extremely difficult to shift. They rule my reactions and responses far more than I like, or am even aware of.

This can even reach the point where we can start to confuse our habits with who we are: as they become so habituated that in a practical sense they form what we think of as our “personality”. Remember that excuse “I can’t do much about it, it’s just the way I am”. It is indeed as St John says: “it is with reason that it [a habit] is to be called a second nature.”

Jesus said in today’s gospel that we should “deny ourselves and take up our cross daily and follow him”. This is one of those very deep sayings that I suspect keeps on giving insights to different people at different levels depending on where they are on the healing and transformational path that is our religion. But one overall point is surely that the gospel involves a kind of self transcendence that must surely be tied into finding ways of seeing through, denying, and taking on the false or corrupted versions of what we think is our “self”. To the extent that we confuse our much-vaunted “personality” with what are just bad habits, then we have an ample supply of daily crosses to take up and do something about. Most of that “personality” is a conditioned crust. It is not the image of God, it is not who we were created as, it is not who we really are.

Which brings us to what we might actually do about this in practice. Part of the good news is that if we do start to take on our habits, there is a strong probability that our bigger defilements and problems will become easier to tackle.

Abba Isaiah, one of the desert fathers puts it this way, “He who conquers himself in the little things will also do so in the great ones.”

This is partly because the good habit of self-examination and finding clever ways to work with the small things also helps us with our framing about change issues more generally. That right way includes the consequence that we cannot help but become a lot more humble as we find just how entrenched these supposedly little problems are, how tyrannical they are, and just how many of the little the blighters there are when you pick up the inner rock and see them scurrying out.

I mentioned the good habit of self-examination, which points to a more general element of a balanced spiritual training program: the cultivation of good habits. While I personally think it is more important to examine my bad habits, because that is where the biggest resistances and

barriers lie, it is very important also to cultivate good ones. If you weed a patch of ground and nothing else is put in, the weeds, or new ones, will sooner or later come back.

While all of this should be our daily practice throughout the year, Lent is partly like a bout of serious early spring gardening, of weeding, clearing and planting so that we are ready for late spring and summer.

This Lent I have picked three habits to work on. Just three, to avoid the temptation to complexity and distraction, but hopefully done seriously. And no, my associated choice of disciplines does not involve the cliché about just “giving up chocolate for Lent”. What I am trying hard to do this year is to stay focussed and treat them carefully, watching them in action closely. If we want to overthrow the tyrant, we need to understand the enemy! I suspect that one of the reasons for those traditional Lenten disciplines of fasting, generosity and prayer is that each one of those creates different circumstances in which our conditioned habits are likely to revolt and try and assert themselves. When that happens, you can watch and, maybe working with a trusted guide, work on strategies for mitigating or defeating them. Don’t underestimate the simple act of bringing things out into the open, into the light. Oh, and if you are having trouble identifying those little hidden habits, then maybe ask your partner, or family member or close friend. They will probably with reflection be able to help ...

This work will often not feel easy. But then Jesus did tell us to take up daily cross. And St Paul said that our spiritual lives were like being an athlete in training, which means work. As Frederica Mathewes-Green puts it: “we all want to be transformed, but no-one wants to change”. Indeed. Which underlines why repentance – healthy, liberating, ongoing repentance – is at the heart of the gospel.

In saying this it pays to remember that we are not alone in this. As Abraham and his covenantal relationship suggests, we are on this path through God’s action, through his grace, and ultimately it will be grace that will see us home in relationship with Him. We have been promised that, as we genuinely walk with God, His Spirit will be at work in us.

As we work on our habits, there is also the prospect that our lives and our relationships will become more meaningful and less poisoned by unhealthy and unseen patterns of sin working on us. Working on our habits is a work of liberation, an act of love, and an act of discovery. After all, what is the point of living a life that we have not really understood, or that is just programmed into us? We are, as we pray in the prayer of preparation with which we start our communion service every week, doing practical work with God’s help to “cleanse the thoughts of our hearts”. Working on our habits is also about helping us to dispel illusions, to discover who we are, and done relationally it helps us with our healing and progressive transformation.

You will not be surprised that the traditional greeting during this season is not to say, “Have a happy Lent” (!) But does anyone know what the normal seasonal greeting is? As we walk with our Lord over the coming weeks towards His Passion and glorious Resurrection, can I wish all of us this year a fruitful Lent?