

An Alligator, named Sin.

We try to have study days regularly and recently we have used the Pilgrim Course produced by the Anglican Church. Our last session was on the forgiveness of sin. It is necessary to share our faults honestly with one another in order to work together in harmony and love. It isn't a topic to avoid. On the contrary if it is not faced, relationships soon begin to deteriorate. There are more communities that fold up because of this, than ever do over finance. It is the same in a church fellowship. Yet sin is one of the words that we studiously avoid, or we make a joke about it.

One of our Sisters used to tell children's stories about Jimmy who was sometimes a naughty boy. One such tale tells of his encounter with an alligator named Sin. The inevitable happens and one day he falls into the pond where the alligator lives. It is too long a story to explain how Sin came to be in a garden pond but after all, this is a story! As she moved her hands in a biting motion, the tension in the room mounted. How was Jimmy to escape this time? You will be pleased to read that at the last moment he was rescued. It is not always so in real life and with real sin.

Recently we went to Chester Zoo when one Sister was having a holiday at home week. In the must see list were the crocodiles, not least because our builders had done work there. (We hasten to add that it was when the enclosure was empty. We still have our friends, the builders.) However the first viewing proved disappointing. There was no sign of a crocodile. It was only when a very large



log moved slightly that they suddenly became aware of a long pointed nose and two eyes staring back at them. We have lost that awareness that sin can be dangerous, lurking in the shadows, waiting to take a nibble, or even worse.

Jesus described people as blind, particularly the Pharisees. When he said, quoting Isaiah, that he had come to make the blind see, it was spiritual blindness to which he was referring. We have a great capacity for being blind in that area. Sin is there waiting to bite and we don't even see it. The cause is the same as that of the Pharisees, self-righteousness. This means that we have got it together ourselves, we are good enough, or at least, not as bad as some others. Or perhaps, underneath we know that we have a few faults, but we choose to live with them. Spiritually this is just about as dire as being in a garden pond with an alligator.

The alligator called Sin had been bought at a pet shop, as a cuddly, little reptile, adored by his owner - but he grew and grew. He became uncontrollable and unpredictable. Loved, at first, in the end he was feared. Sin, in real life, can begin in a very small way. Charles Wesley has a phrase in one of his hymns, "nor let one darling lust survive". We love it too much to let go; only half acknowledging

the danger we are placing ourselves in. As it grows we go through a stage where we both love and hate it, until finally we hate it with all our hearts but cannot free ourselves.

This seems to be a very sombre message to begin the new year. If we go on avoiding this subject the months ahead will be difficult and sometimes feel impossible. It isn't only communities and churches that fall apart when it is ignored, it is marriages, team ministries, workplace relationships, in fact wherever there are people relating, or as often happens, not relating to each other. This alligator can definitely cause trouble. We could also mention the damage we do to ourselves when we embrace, and refuse to recognise, the existence of sin. Charles Wesley expresses this poetically but truthfully. He wrote in one of his hymns,

“Stung by the scorpion sin, my poor, expiring soul
the healing sound takes in and is, at once, made whole.”

With its catchy tune, we used to sing it, as young people, at the top of our voices. We had no idea what we were singing! Life has taught us many things, not least that there is a scorpion sin whose sting is deadly. Thankfully, we have also experienced that there is a Saviour who makes us whole.

So what do we do? Perhaps, first of all, we need to stop backing off and face up to the fact that this alligator, or scorpion (you can choose your metaphor) called Sin does exist. Be honest about where the problem lies. It isn't circumstances, our past, or other people, although all these influence us and make the way either easier or more difficult, but primarily, it is ourselves – that unhappy trio, I, myself and me. Well might King David say, on recognising his own great fault, “Woe is me”. If we are truthful, we can echo his words.

Recognition often brings a determined effort to overcome. However we do not have the remedy. There is only One who can forgive, make us whole and give the power to overcome, and that is the Lord Jesus.