

## Noxious 'thoughts' 2 - Lust

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This Lent, we're reflecting on Christ's call to *'repent and believe the good news'*. Literally speaking, the word 'repent' (*metanoia*) means to change our mind. There's a tendency to think of repentance in terms of modifying our behaviour, cleaning up our moral act, and for sure, repentance involves outward change, but it doesn't start there. It starts with the mind. *'Do not conform to the pattern of this world, be transformed by the renewing of your mind'*, Paul writes in his letter to the Romans. If our thoughts and patterns of thinking aren't shifting, then outward adjustments rarely last; we soon default back to old ways. The desert abba Evagrius Ponticus was onto this fifteen hundred years ago, and as you've heard in recent weeks, he discerned eight noxious thoughts, eight common and alienating habits of mind that need to be transformed if we are to enjoy the fullness and freedom of God's Kingdom come near – find peace with God, with others, and with ourselves. Last week, I spoke in more detail about the first of these thoughts, gluttony, and this week I'm having a go at the second, lust.

Now, what I was thinking when I decided to offer this series, I don't know!! Driving home after last week's service, knowing this sermon was coming up – my heart sank! The church has a dubious history when it comes to speaking about sex, and as the recent Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has revealed in stark and depressing terms, there has been much betrayal and failure in matters of sexual integrity. I must admit, I was sorely tempted to avoid this topic. Then again, in light of the spate of recent revelations and allegations to do with sexual abuse in Parliament House, including by parliamentarians, I'm reminded that avoidance is part of the problem when it comes to the thought of lust. It is an issue. It's an issue for our society, as it was for those early desert monks, an

issue that many of us struggle with (at least at times in our lives), a cause of torment and trouble. So, here goes, let's talk about it.

Lust, what is it, and why a problem? Well, as with last week, I went first to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, which offered a range of meanings. At its most benign level, lust can refer to a sense of relish, enjoyment, enthusiasm – to a 'lust for life', for example. As it stands, this is a delightful quality. It gets darker though, when we speak of someone being consumed by a 'lust for success', or money, or of being driven by a 'lust for power', or revenge. This has more of a sense of compulsion. Lust in this sense is dangerous. And then, of course, there's the link between lust and sexual impulse or craving. 'Usually intense or unbridled sexual desire', is how the Merriam Webster dictionary puts, as in: 'He was motivated more by *lust* than by love.' This makes a direct connection with sexual desire, but also gives us the clue that lust has to do with *exploiting* another person to gratify the self, without any deep sense of relationship to or care for the other. Evagrius used the Greek word, *porneia* to name this thought. The English word pornography is derived from this, pornography being the portrayal of sexual subject matter for the exclusive purpose of private gratification and sexual arousal – feeding lust.

Now, having made a connection between lust and arousal, I want also to point out an important distinction. And that is that feeling aroused sexually is not the same as lust, though it has often been denounced in church circles. We are, all of us, embodied sexual beings, and this energy (our libido) is part of the life-force at work in us. Freud called this life-force *eros* (after the Greek god of love), and he postulated that it is vital (literally) in that it sustains energy, heightens creativity, and nourishes our potential for love. Without it we die. Stanley Kunitz, the wonderful American poet who died not so long ago acknowledged this in the last poem he ever published. He wrote it when

he was in his 90s, and in it, he relishes the life-giving effect of libido; fading for sure but still sustaining him. The poem is called *Touch Me*, and here's a segment:

*Outdoors all afternoon / under a gunmetal sky  
staking my garden down,  
I kneeled to the crickets trilling / underfoot as if about  
to burst from their crusty shells; / and like a child again  
marvelled to hear so clear  
and brave a music pour  
from such a small machine.  
What makes the engine go?  
Desire, desire, desire.  
The longing for the dance  
stirs in the buried life.*

Libido, sexual energy, is part of the life force; it is good and God-given; to be appreciated, celebrated, and expressed – invested in the world.

Things are distorted, however, when this sensual bodily energy becomes an end in itself, and the search for pleasure becomes obsessive, and we get caught up in habits of compulsive relief seeking – ‘gratifying the cravings of the flesh’ is how Paul describes it (Eph 2). These habits inevitably lead us to objectifying and exploiting others in order to indulge our desire. Lust is never satisfied. None of this is helped by living in a sexually-charged society, in a world that bombards us with sexual images and that encourages this attitude, even as it condemns the disastrous consequences. And nor are we helped by the fact that many of us grew up in contexts that wittingly or unwittingly caused us to feel confused, awkward, ashamed, and sometimes terrified of our sexuality. Many (if not all) of us bear at least some pain from emotional and sexual abuse in our childhood or teenage years, and some have also suffered in adulthood. None of this is easy to reconcile, or talk

about, and in complex ways, directly and indirectly, I'm sure this impacts on our sense of identity, vulnerability and sexuality.

So, feelings of aliveness – good. Lusting after experiences, power, money, possessions or people, in order to stimulate feelings of aliveness – not good; not helpful; detrimental for well-being, faith and relationships, inflicting sometimes unbearable pain on those who are victims of another's lustful obsession. The extent to which we succumb to the passion of lust, we become trapped in patterns of manipulating the environment (including other people) in order to gain the intensity and satisfaction we crave. Ironically, the more this happens, the less real sense of being and fulfilment we have. The end result is an inner deadening, which is terrifying. The temptation (the neurotic, noxious thought) is to try harder and harder to overcome it. If we succumb to that thought, we become increasingly compulsive, callous and hollow, evermore enslaved, disconnected and defeated.

But where to from here? How do we tame the demon lust? If we return to Evagrius, who had very real struggles in this regard, we're reminded that his chief concern was not in the first instance with deeds so much as with the alienating thoughts at their root. Lustful behaviour, he saw, was a symptom of disordered patterns of thinking. If a monk was to live a chaste life, then he needed to attend to his inner world, and not just his outward behaviour, and the same holds for us. Lust is a thought before it's a deed, it originates as an image in the mind, an image, a fantasy that produces the anticipation of pleasure and deceives us by the illusion of possession. And, of course, in highlighting this, he was really just reiterating what Jesus had taught. Jesus was unequivocal in condemning adultery, but notice he very clearly traces it to the source, the *thought*: *'Everyone who looks at a woman with lust (i.e.,*

perceives her as an object for his gratification) *has already committed adultery with her in his heart*, he says (Matt 5.28). If we are to tame lust, we need to repent of, turn away from lustful patterns of thinking.

A critical part of this, is becoming aware of what our reactive patterns are. What are the triggers, the feelings and fears that go with this habit? Where does it start and how does it typically unfold? Awareness is vital, catching the lie early and exposing the deceptive logic. As Evagrius said, we will be tempted, thoughts will arise; it's not in our power fully to prevent this. What is in our power is to choose to respond. Though, having said that, once we're in a pattern of habituated thinking, started down a well-worn path it's hard to get off. If you've been four-wheel driving or lived in a rural landscape that soaks and freezes in winter you'll know that when your wheel slides into a rut that's it. Which is why sometimes signs warn: 'Choose your rut carefully. You'll be in it for a long time'. If we're going to avoid sliding into the rut of habituated thinking – we need to be aware of when we're heading down that path; we need to read the signs and turn – consciously choose a different path.

The path Evagrius suggested is the practice of letting go. Remember his words: 'Prayer is the laying aside of thoughts'. And by thoughts, he meant especially these destructive thoughts, the *logismoi* – gluttony, lust and so on. When the thought of lust arises, when we're tempted by the compulsion to possess, control or exploit another, we don't indulge it – we don't act out of it, nor keep feeding the thought. That takes us straight into the well-worn rut. At the same time, it doesn't help to pretend it's not happening, to repress or try and stuff it back in the box. This too takes us inevitably back into our well-worn rut because the thought is still there, building pressure. The practice of laying aside thoughts is more subtle than that.

The feeling, the thought has arisen – so acknowledge it, and in *that* sense honour it. After all, the desire to feel alive, the desire for pleasure, for satisfaction and fulfilment is not bad. It's the compulsion to assuage that desire wholly on our own terms – to possess the other as an object, without care, without love that's so destructive, and that undermines our own humanity, distresses and oppresses the humanity of others. So it's not the thought by itself – it's what we do with the thought that makes all the difference.

Repentance at this level is a practice, the work of a life-time. Sometimes breaking free of our ruts requires us to seek professional help, support groups, programs for recovery, and the like. But always, when we truly turn, grace comes to meet us. God longs for us to be liberated, to know deep peace, true compassion, real relatedness with all created things – fulfilled with love, not driven by lust. There's a beautiful post-Communion prayer that for me expresses this promise of repentance. The prayer picks up on the story of the prodigal son – who, when you think about it, was a lustful character, grasping at life, pleasure, satisfaction on his own terms, until he realises the ultimate futility, emptiness and destructiveness of this path. His confession and humility, his turning meets with rejoicing, and so we trust is ours. So, let us pray: 'Father of all, we give you thanks and praise that when we were still far off, you met us in your Son and brought us home. Dying and living he declared your love, gave us grace and opened the gate of glory. May we who share Christ's body live his risen life; we who drink his cup bring life to others; we whom the Spirit lights give light to the world. Keep us in this hope that we have grasped; so we and all your children shall be free, and the whole earth live to praise your name'. Amen