**11th January 2015**

**Luke 5.17-26**

Should Ched Evans be allowed to play professional football again?

Ched Evans scored 35 goals in 42 games for Sheffield United before a jury in Caernarfon crown court brought his season to an abrupt halt in April 2012. The 23 year old Welsh international was convicted of raping a 19 year old girl and was sentenced to five years in prison.

He was released from prison in October last year and the debate has since been about whether he should be allowed to play football again.

Far from being contrite and remorseful Ched Evans maintains his innocence. He released a video in which he said he had been ashamed of what happened and will deeply regret it for the rest of his life – but he failed to say sorry to his victim. He believes his only crime is infidelity to his girlfriend who has chosen to stand by him through all this.

Evans does not contest the facts of what happened that evening in Rhyl in May 2011. He admits that on a night out with his friend and fellow footballer Clayton McDonald, the pair met a 19 year old woman in the queue at a pizza shop when she fell over drunk. McDonald took the girl in a taxi to his hotel. Evans followed later and both men had sex with her whilst Evans’s brother and a friend stood outside the rooms’ window filming what happened on their phones.

The woman told the court she awoke alone with no memory of what had happened and went to the police later that day. Both men were charged with rape but only Evans was convicted. The judge said that the victim was far too drunk to consent to sex and that Evans must have realised that and has consequently thrown away a successful career.

150,000 people signed a petition urging Sheffield United not to reinstate the player. Yet the fans at recent home matches have chanted his name. Oldham Athletic this week considered signing him but after death threats to members of their staff and the withdrawal of sponsorship they had second thoughts. Evans accuses them of giving in to mob rule.   He has said that his silence on the matter was due to legal advice but that he wholeheartedly apologises for the effects that night in Rhyl has had on many people, not least the woman concerned.

His lack of remorse and that fact that he is running a miscarriage of justice campaign has led some to call for him to be banned from football. Some argue that there are lots of professions from which you would be barred from taking part if you had committed rape and that football, because of its influence as role models, should be one of them.

Others argue that he has served his time and deserves the chance of rehabilitation. He has done punishment and everyone should be given a second chance.

Matthew Syed sports columnist in the Times suggested that footballers have never been role models. He quoted Charles Barkley the basketball legend who got sick of commentators trying to co-opt him into a role model position he never wanted. ‘I am not a role model’, he said. ‘I am paid to wreak havoc on the basketball court. Parents should be role models. Just because I dunk a basketball doesn’t mean I should raise your kids’.

Syed went on to say that to condemn Evans beyond due process is not treating him like a role model: it its turning him into a scapegoat. The concern that if Ched Evans gets his job back it may send the wrong message is misleading. The only message youngsters will take from the Ched Evans story is that if you commit rape you will go to jail and your reputation will be trashed and you will be punished.

On the Moral Maze Radio 4’s Today programme, Michael Buerk said: “Nobody comes out of the Ched Evans rape case with any credit – not the victim who’d drunk so much she could barely stand, nor the two footballers who had sex with her in the most sordid of circumstances.

This is a very modern moral mess.

“Difficult, incendiary questions about consent, remorse, atonement, the heightened moral responsibility of public figures, but it all boils down to one question: should Ched Evans play again for the Blades?”

What do you think? Should Ched Evans play again?

VOTE?

Is a sad and depressing case certainly. Sadly the woman who was the victim in this story has had her life damaged and hurt, to the extent that she has had to change her own identity. Arguably she, more than Ched Evan, has paid more dearly.

This is a story of guilt, shame and the search for redemption. As a church minister I come across many individuals who have done something in their past that they are deeply ashamed of, that has in many cases ruined their lives and then they have to live with the consequences. They long for someone to take the guilt away. They long for a second chance.

Our story from the gospel of Luke today is a story about forgiveness and healing.

A paralysed man is lowered through a roof in order to get to Jesus. Jesus sees the faith of the paralytic’s friends who have made all the effort to get their friend to Jesus. In other miracles in Mark’s gospel, faith is ascribed to the action involved in coming to Jesus for healing (5.34, 10.52). No affirmation about the person of Jesus or the nature of God accompanies these actions: the actions speak for themselves and speak of confidence in Jesus ability. These faithful or trusting actions precede healing rather than coming as the result of healing. It is a great story of the power of faith. With events this week in France that show the destructive and deadly consequences of extremist faith, it is an antidote that points to the fact that faith can also be a powerful force for good in the world. The faith of these friends makes a difference to the paralytic.

But what is startling is the first words Jesus says to the paralysed man. Our over familiarity with this story may have blunted our reaction to this story. In response to the faith of those who have brought the paralysed man to him, the expectation is that Jesus will tell the man to walk or pronounce him healed. Instead, Jesus announces ‘your sins are forgiven you’.

If you had been paralysed and made a difficult journey to see a healer and then been carried up on to a roof and lowered through a hole made in the ceiling would you like to be greeted with the words ‘your sins are forgiven?’

Was Jesus referring to the mess you have made in the roof? Look I’m not going to make you pay for that mess! Or do the sins refer to the mess he had made of his life? It prompts the controversy that follows, as a result of which Jesus claims for himself the authority to forgive sins and then effects the cure. Which then prompts the question what is the relationship between forgiveness and healing?

The assumption at work is that illness or affliction comes about as the result of sin. Because that connection has often been twisted to inflict needless guilt on persons, it is important to consider carefully what is said here. Jesus’ statement that the man’s sins are forgiven may indeed suggest that his paralysis results from sin, but the man does not rise and walk when he is forgiven. More important from the outset of Jesus ministry he initially proclaims that everyone stands in the need of repentance (1.14-15) there are no exemptions from this category. The paralysed man simply becomes a specific instance where two major features of Jesus ministry, forgiveness and healing, come together. . This is a story about Jesus, not a story about the origins of disability.

There was interesting discussion the previous week when research suggests that most cancers are caused by random factors, such as failure of DNA replication mechanism rather than lifestyle choices. The research suggested that lifestyle has little bearing on the chance of getting cancer. In other words don’t blame yourself if you should develop cancer.

The questions ‘which is easier? To forgive sins or make someone walk – points to the fact that unlike forgiveness, healing is verifiable. When healing is accomplished Jesus power cannot be denied as is clear with people’s amazement in this story.

It is a startling statement to greet someone with. ‘Your sins are forgiven’. Housegroups have been looking at the nature of our humanity and why we need a Saviour.

The Bible names our central problem as sin. This is a distortion of the image of God. We do not live in the ways God desires, we treat God and others in ways that are not loving and just and hold attitudes in which our own self-interests are primary.

We go our own way and not God’s.

Sin has many faces in the contemporary world. Traditionally it has been seen as ‘pride’, the ‘will to power’ and egocentricity. Feminists have suggested that the reverse may also be sinful - that of passivity and fear of initiative – in the face of domination it is sinful to yield to acquiescence. Neither an inordinate love of self nor a hatred of self are what God intended for human life. The commands are there – love God and love your neighbour as yourself. If we don’t love ourselves then that is sinful. If we only love ourselves, that is sinful. Getting the balance is required.

Last week I introduced this month’s sermon series about following Jesus and how when at his time of year a lot of courses, and fitness schemes are advertising themselves by saying they will be good for your health and well-being . I made the claim that following Jesus will be more comprehensive for your health and well-being.

Staggeringly the first thing you have to accept in following Jesus is that you are not well, and have no wellbeing. You are sinful. You could argue that the belief that we are all sinners gives us excellent grounds for forgiveness and self-forgiveness. It is kinder than any expectation that we might be saints, even while it affirms those standards all of us fail to attain.

What is crueller or more self-deluded than the idea that we can be perfect? We just set ourselves up for a fall.

The way to well-being is paradoxically to recognise that you are not well. From that position of humility you can be more whole and more free to accept your own failings and those of others – knowing that we all need grace and forgiveness.

Ched Evans isn’t perfect by a long shot. The problem is that he is perceived as not being remorseful enough.

When people fail and do things that cause guilt and shame and hurt others and hurt themselves. You can’t say ‘it doesn’t matter – forgive and forget’. Ched Evans may plead his innocence but even he knows he has cheated on his girlfriend and behaved shamefully in this incidence. Football fans are very unforgiving and should he ever play again he will suffer a lot of abuse from the terraces that will remind him of what he got himself involved in. There are always consequences to our actions. They often affect not just ourselves but a wider circle of people. Ched Evans has paid for that and will have to continue to live with that.

Yet the story of Jesus opens up the possibility of grace – mercy that allows someone a second start, which does not trap people in a vice of condemnation. But says go and live, live differently, be transformed through this for the better. Jesus is pro-active in offering forgiveness.

God forgives. God forgives Ched Evans! It sounds trite and makes God out to be a soft touch. It questions justice and punishment. It mocks and kakes light of the hurt done, particularly to the victim. But forgiveness is a two way process. Someone may offer forgiveness but you have to be willing to accept that you have done something that requires their forgiveness. So God forgives – that is God’s default position: but can we accept that forgiveness. Can we forgive ourselves? Can we say ‘sorry’?

The only person to whom Evans has said sorry is his girlfriend Natasha Massey, for having been unfaithful to her.

But for now he remains, in the eyes of the law, a rapist. And for many that remains incompatible with playing football as long as he fails to apologise.

It isn't simply a moral question. According to criminologist David Wilson, a former prison governor who has worked with sex offenders, acknowledgement of culpability is absolutely key to making rehabilitation work. He said ‘It would be entirely right for Evans to return to football "if he had acknowledged his guilt, if he had completed the required sex offender treatment programmes, if he developed an understanding of why what he did was wrong".

Neither you nor I know about Ched Evans personal history, his background, his life circumstance, what has shaped him and made him the person he is. It is always easier to throw stones without taking the time to take down the walls that people build up to stop them understanding someone else.

I did a funeral for an old lady many years ago who lived a difficult life. She had few friends because she was full of bitterness and anger. Her father died at an early age and she lost her childhood because her mother made her look after her siblings. To escape the home she got herself pregnant, outside of marriage. Sixty years ago that brought great shame on you and your family. The whole community shunned her. Her step father and mother disowned her and kicked her out of the house. The father of her child deserted her and ran away. This was the time when you couldn’t claim benefits as a single parent so she had to go to the workhouse as she was destitute. Consequently she grew up embittered feeling the world condemned her. She was angry all her life and consequently had few friends. Knowing her back story you can understand why she became the person she was. I thank God we don’t quite have those attitudes today. Condemning attitudes always kill. And there but for the grace of God could go you or I if we had similar experiences.

The world says it is difficult to forgive someone who is unrepentant. Following Jesus challenges us to forgive someone up front and then pray for grace to change them and make them repentant – so that forgiveness is complete and healing and wellbeing may be achieved.

I pray Ched Evans is lot wiser due to this incident. I pray he may have more respect for women and that he will use his experience to become a better person.

I am a Christian because I believe Jesus is about grace and mercy and I have known that grace and mercy in my life. U2 had a great song a while back called Grace.

Grace, she takes the blame  
She covers the shame  
Removes the stain  
It could be her name  
  
Grace, it's the name for a girl  
It's also a thought that changed the world  
And when she walks on the street  
You can hear the strings  
Grace finds goodness in everything  
  
Grace makes beauty out of ugly things

In the gospel story Jesus forgives and then he heals. As we know the forgiveness and acceptance of God for us may we find deeper healing in our lives.