

# **2CH Sunday at 7.30**

## **Dealing with shame**

Presented by Margaret Wesley

I hope you are seated comfortably, because this morning I plan to talk about something that makes us all feel uncomfortable. It makes us hang our heads and drop our eyes to the ground. It dries up our mouths and stops us from thinking clearly. It can make adults act like school children - and it can make young women starve themselves to death.

It is something that grows inside us and turns us against ourselves – but it isn't cancer. It can completely paralyse us – but it isn't fear. It can create concrete barriers between us and other people – but it isn't hatred. I hope you will stay with me this morning as we look closely at something that usually makes us look away.

I am speaking this morning about one of the most uncomfortable emotions that we experience: the emotion of shame or humiliation. Shame can make us wish the ground would open up and swallow us. It can make us tell lies and become terrified that anyone might discover the truth about us. It can make us hate and abuse ourselves, and it can make us hate and abuse other people.

When we look at the Bible, we can actually see the way that shame entered into human experience. It says that when God created people, they were naked and they were not ashamed. Naked and not ashamed.

Imagine.

Imagine having everything about you exposed for others to look at. Not just your body – though that would be enough. But imagine that others knew about everything you did, everything you thought, everything you hoped and dreamed. And imagine that you could be completely exposed in that way and not at all uncomfortable.

Imagine being so completely known and yet not feeling the need to justify or deny or minimise anything about yourself. Not feeling any need to bring others down to your level.

The Bible says that was the way humans were at first. That was the way humans were meant to be.

But it went wrong.

The first thing that happened when Adam and Eve disobeyed God was the experience of a new emotion – an emotion that made them feel separated from each other and from God; an emotion that made them want to hide from each other and from God; an emotion that made them try to justify their own behaviour and place the blame on others. For the first time, humans felt shame.

And we feel it with them, don't we?

When you look at pictures of beautiful people in magazines- perfect smiles, glowing hair, tight abs - and then you catch a glimpse at your own face, your own body, in the mirror. You feel it, don't you?

When you hear all about how your cousin getting yet another better job, another book published, another bigger house. And you think about your own career that hasn't moved in years; and your credit card that is constantly maxed out – just keeping the family fed. You feel it, don't you?

When the door bell rings, and I look around at my home, and see the kids' games and clothes spread over the floor, the stains on the furniture, the dust on the shelves. I certainly feel it. I think twice about opening the door and letting people in to see the chaos in my life.

We all feel it. Shame is one of the most universal – and most painful emotions we experience.

There is a story in the Bible that I have often found a bit confusing. It takes place after Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus' followers are feeling lost and unsure about what they were supposed to be doing now Jesus isn't with them any more. So they did what my Dad would have done. They went fishing. That isn't the confusing bit. That makes perfect sense.

What happens next is that they see a man on the shore and realise it is Jesus. Peter is so excited about seeing Jesus again that he can't wait for the boat to get back to shore. He decides to swim. Now here's the confusing bit. It says that before jumping in, he puts his clothes on, because he was naked. I'm not sure why he was naked. Perhaps that's what fishermen did in those days. My question is, why would he put clothes on to go swimming. We usually take our clothes off to swim – at least most of them. But he put his clothes on. You've seen movies about people in the first century. They wore loosely fitting, long, flowing robes. These were hardly convenient for swimming. They would drag him down; make swimming harder work.

Why would Peter put clothes *on* in order to swim?

We spoke a little earlier about the first humans being naked and not ashamed. They had nothing to fear from exposure. But that changed, and now we cover ourselves up, hide ourselves, put clothes over our shame.

It seems that Peter did not want to face Jesus naked. He wanted to be covered. He was deeply ashamed and didn't want his humiliation to be exposed.

You see, not too long before this scene, when Jesus was on trial and about to receive the death sentence; when Jesus was isolated and humiliated and abused; Peter had distanced himself from Jesus. Three times, in the glow of a charcoal fire, Peter had been accused of being one of Jesus' followers, and three times he had insisted that he didn't even know him. Peter *had* thought he would be able to face anything for Jesus, but now he found that he didn't have the strength of character, even, to stand beside his teacher, to identify with him in his pain.

He said he didn't even know him.

On that Friday, Jesus went to the cross alone. And alone in death he was laid in a tomb. But unlike Peter, God the Father didn't abandon Jesus. On Sunday, God raised him to life – to life more full and complete than any human has known.

And there he was. On the shore. The Lord that Peter had followed and loved and disowned. No wonder he wanted to cover himself up. No doubt he hoped that Jesus would not look too closely at him, not notice the betrayal in his eyes; the shame in the pit of his stomach.

That's how it is with Jesus, isn't it? He is so loving, so strong, so good. We want to get closer to him. We want to feel the healing of his touch; the clarity of his words; the safety of his presence. But as we approach him, we become aware of how little we deserve the friendship of one like him. We remember all the nasty, little, mean things we have done – but worse than that, we feel that at the centre of who we are, there is something nasty, something little, something mean.

And so, like Peter, we want to cover up – to hide our shame – to pretend to be better, bigger, stronger than we are.

But the moment Peter found himself with Jesus, he must have realised that it was all useless. Jesus saw it all anyway. And loved him, anyway. And trusted him, anyway.

That's how it is with Jesus. Isn't it?

Peter found himself, with wet soggy clothes, and a trembling heart, facing the teacher he had abandoned. No doubt his head and shoulders were drooping; his eyes were on the ground; his mouth dry and his head fuzzy.

Jesus was cooking fish. He had made a charcoal fire – to remind Peter of the night when he had denied him. To show Peter that there was no point trying to hide. Jesus knew all about what Peter had done. And Jesus was making him breakfast.

Then Jesus did something that many of us find too humiliating; at least now that we are adults. He asked Peter for his friendship. He said, "Peter, do you love me?" And gave Peter the opportunity to say "Yes". He asked him three times, giving Peter the opportunity to go back, in his mind, to that night of his failure, and get it right this time. Three times, Peter insisted that he did love Jesus. And Jesus told him that, in spite of his failure, Peter would be a leader in the church. As more and more people chose to follow Jesus, Peter would teach them and encourage them, and set an example for them of faithful perseverance.

Jesus met Peter in his shame, and showed him that the last label to be placed around his neck did would not say "This man denied Jesus". It would say, "Jesus loves this man".

I wonder what labels have been hung around your neck: "Average"; "Shy", "Pushy", "Disorganised", "Cold". Will you meet Jesus at the place of your failure, and let the one who made you determine how valuable you are. Will you let Jesus take that label off and replace it with one that says: "This one is special. This one is worth dying for."

Jesus met Peter on the beach. But the most important place where he meets us in our shame is on the cross. There he was treated like a criminal. There he was naked and exposed, with his whole body dragged down by the weight of pain and humiliation. He was naked and he was ashamed. But the shame he felt was mine. And it was yours. And it was Peter's. The full force of human shame was carried in Jesus' body that day. It was all exposed. It was all ridiculed. And it was all put to death.

It has been dealt with. Our shame has been taken away.

When I began, I said that I might make you feel uncomfortable. And perhaps I have. But I hope that by now you have lifted your head and straightened your shoulders. I hope your head has cleared and your mouth is full of praise for God.

You used to cover over the ugly bits of yourself, so much that you hid your real self – even from people who love you. We have all done that. Shame makes us do that. But whatever it is you wanted to hide, Jesus has dealt with it. Jesus has taken the shame away. Jesus has freed you to be the magnificent, beautiful, courageous person he created you to be.

So it's time to get on with being that person! Show the world how wise and loving God is for making and healing and choosing you.