

## Sermon Ordinary Sunday 14 Year A 2017

Last week the 2016 census data was released. For the first time those claiming no religion, something like 29% of the population, is *more* than those who identify as catholic. Somewhat surprisingly the Australian newspaper decided to feature the country's current religious landscape. But from the census data the headline of the article actually declared, 'Religion still binds the nation's families.' A note of optimism amongst the gloom. Of course, a front-page article needs a suitable picture. And not surprising, an obviously Muslim women, with a bright and cheery toddler in her arms, became the face of Australia's religious families. It is entirely appropriate of course. There is no denying that the veil or headscarf is a distinct, identifying feature of that faith. Sheikhs and their turbans benefit from the same. External markers are important for groups in establishing and maintaining identity.

Such visible external markers have not really been part of our tradition. Our Lord tells us that *is by their fruit you shall know them*. In the second century, the Christian writer Tertullian reported how some pagans observed the church saying, *see how these Christians love one another*. I spoke last week how our commitment to Sunday worship gives the most powerful and perfect expression of resurrection faith. Love of our fellow man and worship *are* important fruits: common to all faithful Christians and important markers of our identity. For us who identify as *catholic* Christians, we do well to also ask the question, *by what fruit shall we be known?* Candles, chasubles, and surpliced choirs, however nice, are not essential fruits, not essential to the catholic faith. The marker of catholic Christians – the things that set us apart and indicate our identity and belonging – ought certainly include commitment to the Scriptures and creedal faith. But ought also include reverence to the Sacrament, love for the Mother of God and confession. Remove any of those - being casual around the sacrament, indifferent to Mary, or diminish the importance of confession - it's hard to see how we can maintain a right to claim ourselves as catholic Christians. It's probably fair to say that the hardest of these for most of us is confession.

The gospel today reminds how the burden of our hearts and lives may be lifted. And by the grace of God, the church provides us with a means – a sacramental means – by which this is realised. The gospel we have heard today tells us that the unique mission of Jesus is to reveal the mystery of God to us. Jesus shows us what God is like.

And as Jesus shows us God what God is - reveals him to us - we find the One who does indeed remove the burdens we carry. We look to Jesus and we see there is nothing fear in approaching God with all that weigh us down.

C. S. Lewis wrote "*We are what we do*". Lewis recognized that our outer habits form our inner selves. It is our actions that help form our prayers and our approach to God. This is true for our church too. It's what we *do* that show's what we *are*. Yes. Confession is one of the marks of catholic Christianity because it shows what we believe about God and human nature. Now for some of us the practice of auricular confession may seem strange and unusual, from another tradition, not ours. In the Anglican Church, coming as we do from the Catholic and Reformed tradition, we have a *via media* - middle way - approach. We do not make it an obligation that people confess to a priest, but we do give people the opportunity. The regular way to express our confession is in public, in our celebration of the eucharist. Our Liturgy reminds of St Paul's command that *none ought partake of the Body and blood of the Lord unworthily*. And our Lord's own command that we ought not approach the altar bearing a sin against our brother.

But there is also opportunity to make a sacramental confession to God through a priest and for some people this is the only way to make real the truth they need to tell. Cranmer in his Prayer Book included a form of Confession in the ministrations for the sick. At that time, to be sick of course was a serious business and so was a way of preparing people for death. Our current prayer books allow for a form of confession. So, we can never say its un-Anglican as some try to insist. The Anglican teaching with regard to confession is, "*All may, some should, none must*". That is, no one is to be compelled to make their confession but it is available to all, and it is up to an individual's conscience whether they should or not. It is, if you like, a tool in the spiritual kit that we should not be afraid of.

One of the principal reasons why personal confession is so important is that it helps liberate us from the burden of self-satisfaction, the burden of trying to save ourselves. The apostle Paul made this the central platform of his theology: it is God who justifies us. Trying to save ourselves is simply wasted time and energy. In the world around us, however, self-justification is rife. But self-justification is a heavy, heavy burden because there is no end to it.

There will always be a new situation in which we must make sure we have defended our position, convinced others we are worth our salary or our status or our relationship with them, or their respect, even love for us. We think we need to earn our place in the world over and over again; and continually justify our existence to others by digging trenches in which to hide and defend our fragile ego.

Confession, then is not so much coming to God - with the aid of the priest - with a catalogue of sins. Rather, it is about our habits and our whole orientation towards God or away from God. It is simply pride, the old sin of Adam, that imagines we are always and everywhere on the right track. Rowan Williams has written: *letting our best loved pictures of ourselves and our achievements die, trying to live without the protections we are used to, feels like hell, most of the time. But the real hell is never to be able to rest from the labours of self defence. It is only very slowly indeed that we come to see why the bearing of the cross is a deliverance, not a sentence.*

Seeking God's mercy, seeking the healing he offers, is not an indication of our low self-esteem. It *does* recognise our frailty and vulnerability. And it does recognise that we cannot save ourselves. And it does help us approach God truthfully, helping us let go of the exhausting task of justifying our existence. It helps us rest in the knowledge of the acceptance of God. A modern man or woman comes to God, if we come at all, with minds busy and heads full of people, concerns, against a background of the noise of our frightened world. But the call of confession is that we do not have to live like this; there is a free, extravagant and liberating love being poured out into our lives and the life of the world. We can choose to take on the spiritual task of paying attention to our inner life, trusting that the movement of the Spirit is to bring order out of chaos; trusting in the truth of our fragile selves and the story that Jesus has resisted death and all that death spawns in our world.

Myself, and I know Fr Ian too, will only ever be too happy to administer the sacrament. It's not scary. It's very simple. And it can be life changing. As with any growth, any discipline in the spiritual life, we need to take personal responsibility. But I also hope before too long I can advertise a regular time for confession. We *can* be set free from the yokes about us. We can be liberated from the burdens we carry. May we all grow to trust and rely on the mercy of God and seek the healing he offers. Amen.