

Homily for Lent IV – 2022

‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

At home, above my desk, there is a copy of Rembrandt’s amazing painting of the Return of the Prodigal Son. The overwhelming theme of the painting is the merciful tenderness of the loving Father who, with his arms on the young man’s shoulders, presses the head of his foolish and dissolute son to his breast, all the while looking at the dishevelled figure kneeling in front of him with such heartfelt compassion. Heartfelt compassion for a wretched sinner. Merciful tenderness for wretched sinners... surely, therein is the heart and uniqueness of Christian faith... merciful compassion and merciful tenderness for sinners who repent.

There are three characters in today’s Parable. The prodigal son, the loving father and the indignant older brother. The wayward younger brother had certainly messed up his life in a most embarrassing way. His sins were many and the consequences would be with him for the rest of his days, as he’d squandered his entire inheritance on enjoying the pleasures of the flesh, living for the moment for a brief time. However, the bleak circumstances that he found himself in once his money ran out brought him to his senses. His profligate waste of his inheritance, the shame he’d brought on his family name, his wilful acts of sinful defiance of God’s moral law, filled with him with genuine remorse and, sincerely expressing his repentance, he begged for forgiveness.

The older brother, by comparison was hard working, loyal, dependable, obedient, honest and presumably virtuous in his personal life as well. We’d call him a good man. However, he was full of contempt for his brother and angry resentment, even bitter recrimination, towards the generous treatment his father bestowed upon his wayward brother upon his return. Clearly, he saw himself as being as good as sinless. Sadly, he was blind to the reality of himself.

Quite obviously, the father in the parable is God himself and note his great generosity and tenderness to both sons. The younger is welcomed back with heartfelt

tenderness and unrestrained rejoicing. The elder son, his anger and bitterness notwithstanding, is reminded by his father that... every thing the father has is his!

Christian people need to be frequently reminded of our sinfulness and of the need to repent. Here's a pertinent remark from St Paul... you'll know it, I'm sure..... *'All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.'* (Romans 3:23) Hear the first 3 words again... *'All have sinned.'*

More words uttered by St Paul (I Timothy 1:15) and part of today's liturgy come to mind... *'Here is a true saying that is worthy of all men to be received, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.'* We don't so often hear the very next phrase which is a shame, as it sheets this comment right home when Paul adds ... *'of whom I am the chief.'*

And, just in case what St Paul has to say is not enough, hear again Our Lord's own words, addressed with great urgency to every person in this church today.. *'I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.'* That's Luke 5:32.

Always there are many Christians along with many people coming to faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, who have, like the younger son, seriously messed up our own lives and the lives of others by our deliberate choices ... for anyone in this unhappy situation ... anyone who comes to an understanding of the shame of what we have done and the horror of the consequences of our sinfulness ... when we express sincere remorse and repentance, mercy and forgiveness awaits us.

As well, most faithful Christians need to be frequently reminded that there's an indignant older brother in many of us. He is that sanctimonious, self-righteous and puritanical voice that is ever convincing us that we are the good people, we're the nice ones who've been doing the right thing all along, that we are justifiably shocked at the terrible sins of others. It's an ugly thing to become so superior and certain of our moral righteousness but so blind to our own need for repentance. Once again, though, mercy and forgiveness await anyone who sincerely repents after coming to a realisation of how blind to our own sinfulness we have become.

The season of Lent has always been a time to grow in repentance and turn away from sin and there is no better time to make a Sacramental Confession than in

Lent and Holy Week.

Our Lord himself gave the power to forgive sins to His church in the evening on the day of His glorious resurrection when He said to the frightened Apostles in the upper room... *'Receive the Holy Spirit, if you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any they are retained.'* (John 20:22 -23)

That Apostolic power to forgive sins in Our Lord's name is given to the priests of the church by the ordaining bishop right at the moment of our ordination, when he says... *"Receive the Holy Ghost for the office and work of a priest in the church of God, now committed unto thee by the imposition of our hands. Whose sins thou dost forgive they are forgiven: and whose sins thou dost retain they are retained..."*

Anyone at all familiar with the contents of the Book of Common Prayer would know that in the Order for the Visitation of the Sick, a form of Absolution of sins is given for an Anglican Priest to use when he has heard an individual confession. It goes like this.... *Our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath left power to his church to absolve all sinners who truly repent and believe in him, of his great mercy forgive thee thine offences. And by His authority committed unto me I absolve thee from all thy sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*

Now, it's never an easy thing to be like the prodigal son and face up to our sins and their consequences... whatever they may be. And it may well be even more difficult to face up to the fact that I've become so lost in the sin of self-righteousness and self justification that I can't see any need for repentance and none whatsoever to confess my sins. It has to be said quite emphatically... neither should it be easy, and not for one moment either, because our salvation and forgiveness was gained for us at great price by the passion and death of Our Lord Jesus Christ and that was certainly no afternoon picnic, or stroll in the park.

If you are uncertain as to whether you need to make a sacramental confession, a serious examination of one's conscience is a good start to discerning the answer. Consider the following...

1. Think firstly of the two great commandments ... Love God with all your heart,

mind and strength and love your neighbour as yourself... how well do you keep both?

2. Think then of the Ten Commandments and apply each one to your life... do you keep them?

3. Think also of St Paul's stern admonition to Christians that is found in Galatians 5: 19-21 *'When you follow the desires of your sinful natures, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarrelling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Let me tell you again,'* warns St Paul, *'that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the kingdom of God.'* There's a wake up call.

4. In similar vein to Paul's admonition, think of what are called The Seven Deadly Sins (they're deadly because, bit by bit, they destroy faithful Christian living) they are: Pride, Envy, Gluttony, Lust, Anger, Greed and Sloth... Do some or all of them have you in their grip?

Reflecting on any or all of the above four is usually a very sobering experience indeed for any honest person, reminding us how wounded we are by original sin and how plagued we are by selfishness, which is the root of all sin.

If you are a bit frightened about making a Sacramental Confession to a priest, where to begin, what to say, how to say it and so forth, remind yourself that making a humble confession is both Biblical and Apostolic. Millions have done so before you. Ask your Parish Priest, or any priest you know and trust, to explain to you how to go about making your confession. Take heart, everyone else who has made a sacramental confession has experienced the same fear. I am one of that number, my first confession being that of a fearful and deeply ashamed 17 or 18 year old youth. My own experience of the transformative and healing power of this sacrament, and that alone, is what enables me to speak to you today. With all my heart and soul, with every fibre of my faith in the Risen Lord Jesus Christ, and with what is now 55 years of experience of this Sacrament, I can assure everyone in this church ... young or old ... of the powerful grace of healing and forgiveness that is expressed with such merciful tenderness and heartfelt compassion in the Sacrament of Confession.