

Homily 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time (30.9.18)

'Confession is good for the soul'

I was pondering the readings this week and I was recalling all the jokes I used to hear when I was young about confession. You don't hear them now, do you? Some were great jokes, and one came to mind. I don't know if you have heard it. It's about the rabbi who lives next door to the Catholic priest and he says,

"So, what is all this confession of sins about?" He said,

"Well look here, you're a respectable clergyman of your own religion. Just come and join me this Saturday and listen, and you'll get the hang of it."

So they're in there and the first person comes in and says,

"I've committed adultery three times." And the priest said,

"Oh, that's serious, give 10 pounds to charity to show your renunciation." So the next person comes in, and they said,

"I've stolen three times."

"Oh, that's very serious," said the priest, "give a tenner to charity because you need to renounce that game."

And with that, a knock came on the confessional door and it was the housekeeper, and she said,

"Father, there's a very urgent sick call, you must go. They're on the edge of death." And he told the rabbi with anxiety, he said,

"Look, I must go do this, you've got the hang of it, take over till I get back."

[laughter]

So the third person comes in and said,

"Father, I've been fighting two times."

He said,

"Go fight again, it's three for a tenner." [laughter]

That's the sermon. [laughter]

No. That joke not just makes a mockery of confession, but it takes away, it makes sin sound legalistic. So I looked up sin in the catechism, the new catechism, and it said,

"Sin is an offense against reason, truth, right conscience, because it's a failure to love God and neighbour."

And we don't seem to talk about sin much nowadays and it's interesting to see that definition, because it's long time since I've looked to the new catechism. Bishop Konstant had a lot to do with it. Of course, it still makes the distinction very much so, between **mortal** and **venial sin**. It said,

"Sins rightly have to be evaluated according to their gravity".

And gravity is defined literally as the weightiness of the sin, if we have to know our culpability. A **mortal sin** by definition means that which destroys charity within our hearts and cuts us off from the grace of God.

And in my experience as a priest, I've found that is often true, that when somebody's been estranged from church because of some serious event in their lives, some serious sin, they feel estranged from God even though they want God and they find it difficult to move and come back. And the real issue around confession of course, and sin, is that we need, when we've committed something serious, we need a conversion experience within us, to open us up to God's grace and mercy.

But it's actually very hard to commit a mortal sin, as in being totally to blame for it, and we call that culpability. It's not hard to do something that's weighty, something that's serious, but it's hard actually to commit a mortal sin, and so I thought I'd tell you how to do it. [laughter]. Because mortal sin presumes not only full knowledge of the gravity of the act, but it needs complete consent. In other words that I plan, it's almost like as they say in court, it was a premeditated act. So if there be just duress or you were under pressure from someone else to do something and you made a rash act, you may commit a serious sin but not be fully culpable. It's a grave action if you steal or murder, but it's not necessarily mortal if you were not in control. So that's the difference between the object of sin and my personal consent and responsibility for it. And grave matter by definition means there's a hierarchy of seriousness. And that's elucidated in the 10 commandments, isn't it? In other words, some things are weightier than others. Mortal sin is just an umbrella for anything that's grave. So for example, keeping the Sabbath holy, which for us is going to mass every Sunday, is a grave obligation, but it can't possibly be that missing mass is as serious a sin as murder, can it?

So obviously there's grades of gravity and I'm not mocking anyone but, one parish I was on, a very working class parish, the nuns there had ruled in that school for 100 years and they taught people backwards, that missing mass on Sunday was a mortal sin, it was a grave issue. And my caricature of confession, this is nobody's actual confession, but it sums up many a week when I used to listen to 80 year-olds coming into confession and they said, "Father, I missed mass last Sunday because I was undergoing brain surgery." [laughter] And I used to say,

"Look, to miss mass on purpose is grave, but if there's a grave impediment, you're excused."

"I know Father, but you've got to confess it. The nuns told us." [laughter]

So that's the important thing, too, that a grave obligation to do something else or impeded by travel or whatever, all those factors, sensible factors have to be taken into account. So, to commit a [mortal sin](#), we have to be aware of God's command and fully consent to go against that command. And the church's teaching is very scriptural, not just in today's Gospel, and today's readings, but splattered throughout the whole of the Bible. Today's Gospel expresses it so well. Jesus isn't talking about missing mass on Sunday when he says,

"If your eye sins, tear it out. Better to go into the Kingdom of Heaven blind, than go to hell."

He's talking about very serious, grave sin. And James in that second reading, and it's a very good reading when if you think of the modern day concern for social justice, James was ahead of his time saying,

"Look the wages, you've held back the unjust payments you've made to workers."

And the scripture actually says it's one of the four sins that cries out from the earth for vengeance. And that's even truer today with people who have an obligation to pay a decent wage and don't, leading to all sorts of problems for the one who doesn't receive. Not just poverty, but maybe crime. So those are the sort of serious sins.

So, confession is there to deal with somebody's inability sometimes to turn to God, because once you make a resolute act to go to confession, grace starts flowing, and the forgiving power of God starts coming into a person who finds

they can't turn to God. And it restores them to full love of God. [Venial sin](#), minor things, we confess these at the beginning of every mass because the absolution in mass, may almighty God have mercy on us, forgives all of venial sin. But we do have a contrast, an important contrast in today's readings. In the Gospel Jesus says,

"If anyone gives you a cup of water to drink, just because you belong to Christ, then I tell you solemnly, they will certainly not lose their reward." And that is a true principle of faith too, that a true act of charity covers a multitude of sins