

## “The Sacrament of Reconciliation” - 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday (B)



8 February was the anniversary of my baptism and by chance I was seeing my Spiritual Director that day in Oxford so I thought I would take the opportunity to go to Confession. My meeting with my SD, however, was purely social so when I asked him could we celebrate the Sacrament, we were not in the privacy of his home or in a confessional but in the café of the Ashmolean Museum. Within an alcove, therefore, as people wandered past with trays piled with cups and cake, I whispered my confession, heard a few words of wisdom and received absolution.

The belief that we can be personally sure of God’s forgiveness of us is the wonderful and unique claim of Christianity. No other religion teaches that God intervened in history, that His Son became flesh, so that we would know the reassurance and the power of our Creator’s forgiveness. That is why the Jewish scribes balked at Jesus’ words to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven’ and thought, ‘He is blaspheming. Who can forgive sins but God?’

And since the Reformation some Christians have denied what Catholics and Orthodox have always known that Jesus continues to exercise his divine authority to forgive sins through the ministry of the priesthood. As St John records, after his resurrection, Jesus said to the Apostles, ‘For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained (20.23).’ We do not, as some Christians do, have to rely upon the self-reassurance that God must have forgiven us. We can know it with certainty for in the Sacrament the priest says, ‘I absolve you from your sins.’ The priest is acting in the person of Christ who for two thousand years since that day in Capernaum has been saying through his priests to countless people, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’

It is of great personal distress to me that some Catholics stay away from the Sacrament. If it is because they do not think they need it then, thank God, for their exemplary lives. But then again, as the practice of the Sacrament developed, I am not aware of any saint who did not regularly go to confession.

Of course, the underlying cause for not going may be a bad experience with a priest, shame or fear. If that is so, I am sorry that anyone is so burdened especially because the Sacrament promises freedom and new life. For as Jesus said in today’s Gospel passage, ‘To prove to you that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,’ - he said to the paralytic - ‘I order you: get up, pick up your stretcher, and go home.’ And the man got up, picked up his stretcher at once and walked out in front of everyone.’

It is highly likely that each one of us here is not perfect and, more than that, have individual things that need to be forgiven or vices that need to be tackled. Our lives with ourselves, with others, with God could be so much more, must be so much more than our sins at present allow. Do not remain paralysed by past experiences, disbelief, shame or fear. Come to Christ in the Sacrament and be healed.