

IT'S A SIN – IS IT?

LOCKDOWN CONFESSIONS

Every year, just before Lent I treat you all to the joys of a sermon about CONFESSION!

The sacrament of reconciliation hasn't been easy to access during the pandemic

I made my *Lent 2020* confession only in July of that year,
and I'm going for last year's *Advent* confession this coming week just before Lent 2021 ...
and my regular confessor is about to move to Paris.

At first I was dismayed, but then I thought –
a few trips to Paris each year might not be too bad after all ...
... as long as it isn't an incentive for extra sinning ...

And in case you're wondering,
making one's confession is perfectly compatible with social-distancing.
You don't have to sit inches away from each other,
sharing the confined space of wooden box.

WHAT IS REAL?

One of the purposes of confession is to help us see what is important and what's not. What's the *real* problem, rather than what we *think* it is.

And because that's so hard to do for ourselves,
sometimes we just need the help of someone else to do that,
someone who can hear objectively, see clearly, and respond lovingly.

Sometimes, a priest might hear a confession like this –

"Father (or Mother), I've done a lot of small things, I've gossiped a few times, I lost my temper with my children ... I've missed church quite a bit, I've told a few white lies, pulled a sicky at work more than once, ... I guess that's about it."

Where does one begin?

None of it sounds terribly big or serious – and perhaps I'm wrong but -
But this person is here.

Why have they come?

And so I might ask -

"Which one of the things you mentioned is most important to you?"

and to my surprise they might say -

"Pulling a sicky to get off work:"

So perhaps they are telling me they regret lying, perhaps on more than one occasion?

– but why is that the most important? Then it comes out:

"Because [they tell me] my boss at work is a bully, and I can't bear to go in anymore. I'm full of hatred and anger towards him, and I can't bear it any more – I've been spreading lies about him in the hope he gets sacked."

So we discover what the real matter is and why this person is here.

This isn't about a white lie and a feigned illness to get off work.

This person is suffering under a great burden of anger and hatred and it's making them do something seriously wrong.

Like a doctor seeking the diagnosis from a mass of symptoms,
the priest's role is to minister the medicine of Christ's mercy for the reason it's needed, and to help someone find health and life again.

This might be the first time the person has told anyone about how they are feeling.

It's perhaps the first time they have even admitted it to themselves.

It's the start of a journey out of misery and into hope – an encounter with Christ himself through the grace of the sacrament.

IT'S A SIN

Now I find I can't talk about this subject this year without mentioning a TV drama that some of you might have seen.

The series 'It's a sin' on channel 4 is about a group of young people, most of them gay men, living together in London in the early 80's at the start of the AIDS epidemic. It's immensely powerful and painful to watch, and those of you who knew that time will remember the fear that in some ways is not unlike the current pandemic.

AIDS didn't create prejudice against gay people, but it brought latent prejudice in society to the surface. And the legitimate fear about a deadly new virus became the catalyst all sorts of hateful language and actions. The title itself expresses the social condemnation of the time, laced with religious judgement – but the title may also be seen as a question – 'It's a sin' Is it? What is?

The complexity of this topic is far beyond the scope of one or indeed many sermons, but the single point I want to make is this:

like in the confessional, the drama makes us ask what was the real sin here?

Was it men and women having relationships with people of the same gender,
or was it parents who refused to see their children as they lay on their death beds?

or medical staff who let them die alone, in terrible agony?

or funeral directors who refused to receive their bodies, or priests who refused to bury them?

Yes, people were frightened about AIDS, and there was so much we didn't know,
but fear combined with prejudice is a toxic combination.

Fear *with* prejudice results in hatred. But fear *without* prejudice may result in courage.

This is revealed in the character of Jill.

A female friend of several of the gay characters.

She's frightened of AIDS too, but she stands by them in their need and sickness,
she comforts, counsels and supports – always loving, never condemning.

To me, Jill is a priestly character, and takes on the quality of a confessor who comes not as judge but as pastor. She is there to listen, and by her love she reveals the *real* sins that the title of the show is about.

LENT CONFESSIONS

Making your confession is harder than watching a TV drama,
but both are uncomfortable, because they make us confront reality.

Maybe what we have to say is relatively minor in the scheme of things,
but the discipline of self-examination is a good one.

God gives us this Sacrament so that we may know the truth about ourselves,
and be set free from the delusions we have and the excuses we make.

As St Paul tells us in Colossians: '*Through Christ God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things*'. That reconciliation effected on the Cross is in the past tense, it is has happened, and it lasts forever as an objective fact – but in our individual subjective lives it constantly needs renewing, it needs receiving again and again.

This Lent I invite you to experience the freedom that comes from knowing yourself and the forgiveness of God. It's the single more important, most powerful and most wonderful thing you could do – to that end, times for confession will be advertised in Holy Week, but you can make an appointment whenever it suits you during Lent.

My prayer for you all is the one said by the priest at start of every confession:

*The Lord be in your heart,
and on your lips,
that you may rightly and truly
confess your sins;
in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.*