

5th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

St. Luke 5:1-12

The most scandalous teachings of the Church are not to do with the body — although they are the ones most criticised—it is the teaching on forgiveness. When the Lord said to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” (*Mt.* 5:44) I think He meant it. When I think about the Church’s teaching on forgiveness and our society’s laws on rehabilitation, I realise just how scandalous is that instruction. When I sin I go to a Priest and I confess those sins before him and by his power I am forgiven. There is no public humiliation, there is no chance that anything that I have said to him will ever be revealed. It all stays in the confessional. But if I commit a crime then I am arrested, I appear before a judge in a public courtroom, and sentenced to prison or some other kind of punishment—and it makes no real difference how sorry I am. If I were to walk in to a police station and confess that I had committed a crime, I highly doubt that the police officer is going to forgive me and send me on my way. The scandal of the Lord’s command to forgive can only really be understood when we compare these two ways. If someone were to commit murder and appear before a judge who, then, rather than sentencing him to imprisonment forgave him, we would be horrified at the absurd leniency of the judge’s actions, but this is what happens when we come before Christ in the person of the Priest and admit our crimes against God and man. Admittedly we must perform a penance in order to attest to our sorrow and our desire for holiness and to restore, in part, some balance to justice.

Many people avoid the confessional. It can be confronting or embarrassing or maybe seen to be unnecessary. Confession is confronting because it is not God or man that accuses us of our sins but ourselves. We admit to ourselves and to Christ in the person of the Priest that we have done wrong. It can be

embarrassing because even though it is not to the man of the Priest but to Christ in the person of the Priest that we confess, the fact remains that it is still another human being, and maybe someone who knows us, to whom we are admitting what we have done. And some people do see confession as unnecessary. They argue that they can just tell God that they are sorry and that He will forgive them. I have no doubt that God will send His grace upon those who sincerely seek it. The reason, however, that we confess to a Priest and not simply to God in prayer is that, firstly, all sin, even sin committed alone or in private, is public. If we are one body and one spirit in Christ, as Saint Paul says (see *Eph. 4:4*), then whatever happens to one part of the body affects the whole body. If my arm were to drop off I am quite sure that the rest of me would feel it.

The Lord chose men, not Angels, to be His Priests. If He had chosen Angels then we would stand before these spiritual beings who dwell in Heaven and not on earth and who could barely understand the joys and pains that we experience. But the Lord chose men to be His Priests. Men with bodies and souls, who live on earth and not in Heaven, who know the joys and pains of mankind, and who are just as likely to sin as any one else. The Lord does not choose perfect men to be His Priests, he chooses imperfect men, because only those who share the experience of others can truly understand lives of others. God Himself did not remain in Heaven but became man in Jesus Christ so that He Himself would share the joys and pains of all people. So God is not distant from our failings and temptations and neither are His Priests—just as Isaiah said in the first reading, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips” (*Is. 6:5*). But Priests, these men of unclean lips and who themselves must go before the Lord in the person of His Priests and confess their sins, by the power of Christ become like the Angel of whom Isaiah spoke and who said: “your guilt has been removed and your sin forgiven” (*Is. 6:7*). Isaiah was freed of his sins by the Angel bearing a piece of coal taken from the altar that touched his lips. We are freed of our sins by the priest

bearing the sacrifice of Christ and touching our souls.

There is nothing so bad that we have committed that God cannot forgive and transform into good. But for that to happen we must confront ourselves and admit what we have done and seek the grace of God in the Sacrament of Penance. The Resurrection itself is the greatest sign that there is nothing so damning that God cannot transform. In the crucifixion of Christ evil shot its silver bullet—it threw everything that it had at Christ—and Christ died. But evil could not keep Him dead for He was raised to life, and not to the same life that He had before, but to a glorious life in which He could no longer die.

The grace we receive from the Sacrament in confession may not mean that we will never sin again. Often we will commit the same sin over and over again. What it does mean is that we are slowly strengthened and each time we sin after that evil has a weaker and weaker hold on us because the Holy Spirit's hold becomes stronger and stronger. We will never succeed by our own powers—we were never meant to. We were created to succeed by God's power, who came down to earth and became man so that we would be taken up with Him and become like God.