



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

Remember the last things and stop hating

*Readings: Ecclesiasticus 27:30 -28:9, Romans 14:7-9, Ps 102,
Matthew 18:21-35*

On the ancient tombs in the great Roman basilicas, much as in an English country churchyard, there are carved stark skeletal reminders of our mortality – that our walk on this earth is a brief one. The book of Ecclesiasticus reminds us to see everything in this light, to remember death, judgement, heaven and hell and to renounce hatred and live by love. St. Paul tells us that the life and death of each one of us has its influence, for good or ill, on those around us. What will my fellow companions on the pilgrimage of this life glean from the way I live my life and how I prepare for my dying?

The Gospel account takes Peter's apparently simple question and gives it an eschatological answer. Jesus tells him about forgiveness, unforgiveness - resentment retained, hatred nurtured, - and the Last Judgement.

The proper answer to Peter's question, 'How often should I forgive my brother?', the traditional rabbinic answer is that you should forgive the transgressor three times, four at a push. It is this formula that echoes in the prophet Amos' warning to the Northern Kingdom when God says, 'For three transgressions and for four I will etc. etc.'

Three or four pardons is, by anyone's standards, pretty generous. Jesus' answer to Peter's amazing offer of 'seven' pardons is to multiply it -in one Gospel to 77 times, to the other 70 x 7 (490 for the additionally challenged). The story He tells to justify this extravagance is one of His most frightening accounts of Hell.

The forgiven servant (who owes his master the unpayable debt of several times the Gross National Product) begs mercy and is forgiven. His response is to nearly throttle then cart off to the nick a fellow servant who owes him five bob. The upshot is that the ungrateful wretch himself is banged up with the torturers until he can pay – which is never.

When Jesus died on the Cross for our sins it was that we might have divine forgiveness and reconciliation, the hope of the Presence and the promise of eternity. When we, the bankrupt debtors to the Lord of Lords, refuse to extend that mercy to our debtors then we spit on the Cross of Christ. It is, therefore, no accident that, historically, the greatest fear of a Catholic Christian was to die, unshriven, unreconciled, unforgiving and thus unforgiven.

That would be reasonable and an entirely sane response to Jesus' teaching. Christ's sacramental provision for that reconciliation, through the ministry of the Church, is through Confession.

However, judging from the almost wholesale disappearance of sacramental Confession from the lives of many practising Catholics it appears that large numbers have adopted the prevailing cultural view that – if there is a God – God will be so pleased that we have turned up at all to grace His eternal

abode that He will admit that all that Messianic stuff (you know how children exaggerate) about Judgement and Hell was a radical overstatement, hyperbole, and that, given His time over again Jesus would have gone down the co-counselling and psychotherapy route.

The technical term for this sort of post-conciliar theology is 'baloney'.

The price of our forgiveness is His Blood shed on the Cross. The cost of the reconciliation of Fallen Man is marked by the thorn crown and the flagellum. The unpayable debt of our weary, spent out, sin stained dust is cancelled by the abundant mercy that hovered over Our Lady and, through obedience, robed Himself in our flesh, walked the Galilean hills and the Dolorosa, died with forgiveness on His lips and, by the power of His Divinity, shattered the gates of Hell and offered Man redemption, salvage, salvation, eternity.

Being forgiven and being forgiving go hand in hand. Few things wreck a soul more completely and permanently than unhealed resentment, unforgivingness. It does more damage to the hater than the hated. It eats away at personal relationships. It wears away the bonds of community life. It dries up the well springs of pity and makes us dry and narrow people. And that is simply the dynamic of our human psychology. Spiritually, terrifyingly, it blocks the channel of the Divine Mercy with terminal consequence. That is the implication of Christ's parable today and a truth He gives us to repeat every time we pray the Pater Noster.

The great thing we learn in the Confessional is the joy of being forgiven. We recall, with childlike gratitude, the extraordinary liberation of the gift of

God's love for us in the sacrifice of His only begotten Son, Jesus the Christ. We step into the light of His grace and know, not only our reconciliation now but the eternal reconciliation which alone enables us to contemplate, not an eternity of torture, but the promise, being shaven and purified, of dwelling as God's sons and daughters in the glory of the Eternal Presence. This forgiveness, this mercy, this reconciliation, this salvation is, therefore, at the heart of our evangelism, of our sharing the Good News with the world. How we live that forgiven and forgiving life will, as St. Paul, the great evangelist, reminds us, influence the lives of all whom we come into contact with in this life.

Jesus Himself gives us daily reminder in the Lord's Prayer of this vital pattern of praying and living. In this terrifying parable Jesus warns us of the deadly consequences of the unforgiving, ungrateful heart.

In the confessional, Jesus gives us, through His Body, the Church, the means of grace and the hope of glory. There we learn the mystery of His love and walk out into the world to share that divine mercy. There we learn the joy of reconciliation and that promise of eternal reconciliation which, beyond the purification, will see us, not tortured in His absence but welcomed, as His sons and daughters, into the Eternal Presence.

Go early. Go often. Go because you love Him. Go because, liberated and thankful heart, you want to share that love with the world.