



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time-Year C-February 10th2019

Readings: Isaiah 6: 1-8, Psalm 137, 1 Paul 15: 1-11: Luke 5: 1-11

In my ministerial youth I ran a large youth club at St. Alban's Abbey. One of my volunteer helpers was a young Catholic mum called Kathy. In a late night clearing up sessions we got to talking about 'confession'. She recalled that, before her first communion, she had been prepared by a nun who gave her a book with a possible list of sins. Kathy knelt and duly confessed to committing adultery. When the priest, unflinching, asked her 'how many times?', she was at a loss to reply. Kathy's story reflected the worst of the mechanistic, guilt dominated approach to the wonderful gift of this sacrament. It chimed perfectly with my grandma's deep Northern Ireland Protestant prejudice that confession was 'priestcraft' and control on the part of the Church and, on the part of the laity, an excuse for obtaining licence to go out and do it all again. However, in the course of my ministerial life I came, very rapidly, to understand the extraordinary reality and power of this Sacrament and the profound danger of its neglect. On my conversion I was astonished to find myself in a Church with this amazing gift of Jesus and so few people actually availing themselves of it – even though Church teaching insists on annual Sacramental Confession as a bare minimum to Communion and, in the event of mortal sin, as an essential and

immediate requirement.

I mention all this because, as a Johnny come lately, I am all too aware of the glorious gifts of God in His Church and how easily we forget what we have been given. Not only that but, in neglecting these gifts, how we hamstring our pilgrims' progress and weaken the mission of the Church. The power of confession is demonstrated par excellence in today's readings. In each reading we are referred to a theophany, a direct encounter with the Lord and its powerful consequence –the other side of penitence. In the Old Testament we meet the great prophet Isaiah – just ordinary Isaiah at this point. He is in the Temple when the Lord, in all His glory, reveals Himself to the prophet. The vision is overwhelming. The Lord's train fills the Temple. The burning ones, the Seraphim, minister, the foundations shake, the place is filled with the smoke of incense and the hosts of Heaven sing the Sanctus. This is the heart of the Mass and the revelation of the Presence.

Confronted with this amazing revelation of the Glory of God, Isaiah confesses his utter unworthiness. Wretched, lost, impure, in a society of similarly sinful failures. In response to this confession the seraph takes a burning coal to purify him. Fire, the purging love of God, the fire that we will see at The Pentecost, the fire (from the Greek word PUR) which will continue to cleanse us in the Purgatory and make us fit for Heaven, is the same absolving power that will liberate us from our sins in the confessional and send us on our way rejoicing to be faithful and fruitful servants of God. Post penitence and purified, Isaiah can now say, 'Here I am – send me'.

The Epistle: Paul preaches the Gospel.

The first item is –'Christ died for our sins'. It is the primary proclamation. That is the reason He hung on the Cross and suffered and died for us. That is how seriously God takes the dilemma of Fallen Man .

If we truly grasp our tragedy then we will turn to Christ often and seek the liberating mercy of His Blood shed for us. Why would we ignore such a gift that makes us fit for the Presence, ready to enter His courts with praise, hearts open to receive Him and souls dedicated to go out into the world in His service?

St. Paul recalls his own encounter with God, that dramatic humiliation on the Damascus road that blinded him and led him by the hand into the Church of God and enabled him to become one of its greatest servants. And the Gospel.... Far removed from the glory of the Temple or the visions of Damascus, the Lord of all things is sitting in a little fishing boat on the Sea of Galilee. His command to launch out into the deep and the ridiculous success of obedience to His commands leads Peter to his knees. 'Depart from me, Lord. I am a sinful man.' Peter prays.

It is only the other side of that acknowledgement and confession that Jesus can use Peter as His Church leader and evangelist.

Three great heroes of the Faith. Three great proclaimers of God's Word.

What they have in common also is that their ministry begins in repentance. That is because, faced with the Glory of God, we know our own unworthiness and utter dependence on His grace and mercy. The forgiven, the purified, know God's love for Man. Confession is first and foremost an encounter with absolute reality in the Person of the Lord.

Confession demands we confront who God is and who we truly are.

Confession leads us to that marvellous gift of absolution, the freeing of the body and soul to the slavery of sin. When we experience that gift of Christ on the Cross for you and for me, we are lifted up with joy and our hearts are filled with thanksgiving (Eucharist) – the confession becomes reconciliation. Reconciliation becomes thanksgiving. Thanksgiving enables us to respond to His call. In other words confession leads directly to Mission. Isaiah, Paul, Peter, you, me – the spiritual truths

apply to each of us equally.

An impenitent Church cannot preach repentance to the world.

Only when we are in the Presence, kneel in sorrow for our sins and open the gates of mercy can we unleash the power of the Sacrament respond to the Lord's call. 'Here I am Lord. Send me.'

And hear His reply: 'I will make you fishers of men.'

(The link between penitence and powerful witness is clear. Between now and the next penitential (April 12th), Fr. Ciaran and I will be preaching on this again. I want to look at unleashing the power of the Sacrament in our lives AND –preparing properly for Confession. Brothers and sisters I don't want you to think of this as a 'telling off' - we are, after all, in the same boat – but rather as a reminder and an encouragement because we love you and want the best for you and for Christ's Church in this place.)