THE NEW SHOFAR

Bear up the hands that hang down, by faith and prayer; support the tottering knees. Have you any days of fasting and prayer? Storm the throne of grace and persevere therein, and mercy will come down. John Wesley

Lent 5

When was the last time we truly confessed our sins?

Today's psalm is one of the more magnificent laments in the psalter and yet it remains mere words unless we understand and confess that we are indeed sinners in need of the loving mercy and forgiveness of Almighty God. Here, on the verge of celebrating Easter, it is a good time to ponder our unworthiness. It is the call of the psalmist: *De Profundis – out of the depths I cry to you O God.*

Yes, it is true, that at every celebration of the Eucharist there is a brief pause for a confession of sins, but at what level do they engage with our inner selves? They too easily become hiccups in the overall liturgical celebration, and we are lesser for it. And yet it is an undeniable reality that confession and forgiveness are core elements of our Christian journey that lie in deep waters. There is nothing that takes us to the heart of ourselves, our mixed motives, our complex interaction of desires, needs, fears, shame, and feelings so quickly as confessing our sins.

Bad religion puts too much of a focus on sin, but…

Admittedly, an often-repeated criticism of Christianity is that Christians are made to feel guilty, that is not healthy for the Church to be so obsessed by sin, particularly in these days by what it deems sexual sin and there is a truth to. Bad religion - an overemphasis on sin - *is* unhealthy and does not take seriously the message of the gospel: Jesus Christ rose from the grave. An overemphasis on sin, however, keeps him in the grave.

In modern society, self-justification is rife. Self-justification is ultimately a heavy burden because there is no end to it. There will always be a new situation in which we must make sure we have defended our position, convinced others we are worth our status or our reputation or our relationship with them, or even their love for us. The Pharisee in us will convince us we need to earn our place in the world over and over again; and continually justify our existence to others by digging trenches in which to hide and defend our fragile ego. Try asking someone about the need for confessing sin and they will likely respond "Well I don't think I have anything particularly to confess at the moment".

Confessing can sometimes mean wracking our brains trying to think of something we have done a bit wrong or a bit selfishly, so that we can feel sorry at that moment. It is absolutely not about trying to think of something mean I might have said. It *is* about our habits and our whole orientation towards God or away from God.

Modern psychology reminds us that self-knowledge and self-esteem are important. We are more aware than ever that many of our attitudes and actions are a consequence of our self-esteem or lack of it and there are endless self-help programmes available.

We are called to “know ourselves” as God sees us

In Jesus' teaching, the paradox is this; the pride that seems to be the Pharisee's sin is a self-justification that comes not from thinking too much of himself - but too little. If he were able to pay attention to the truth of the person he is, he would be aware of, and attentive to, the tumult of mixed motives, needs, desires and fantasies that is the truth of the human condition. He would then begin with "*Have mercy*". It is inattention to the Truth of who they are that lets the Pharisee rule. We are called to resist the Pharisee inside us with all its impulses of perfectionism, over anxiety, worry and guilt and we throw ourselves - *ourselves as we truly are*, on the mercy of God.

C S Lewis wrote "*We are what we do*". He was not speaking of a utilitarian task-driven way to live, but a recognition that our outer habits form our inner selves, our prayers and our approach to God. This is why approaching God with the phrase "Have mercy on us" is not an indication of our low self-esteem. It is a trustful approach as St Paul teaches us in his letter to the Romans. It recognises our frailty and vulnerability but also makes sure that we are not cast as victims by our awareness of how much we fall short. So, it seems then that the publican in the parable is not a person who has problems with self-esteem; this person is one whose habitual approach to God is truthful, one who has let go of the exhausting task of justifying his or her existence. One who has learned to rest in the knowledge of his acceptance by God.

Out of the depths of our true selves we cry to you O God

A modern man or woman comes to God, if we come at all, with minds busy and heads full of people, concerns, against a background of the white noise of our frightened world.

But the call of confession is that we do not have to live like this; there is a free, extravagant and liberating love being poured out into our lives and the life of the world. We can choose to take on the spiritual task of paying attention to our inner life, trusting that the movement of the Spirit is to bring order out of chaos, trusting in the truth of our fragile selves and the energy of the story that Jesus has resisted death and all that death spawns in our world.

May it be so that we practise this risk and reliance on the mercy of God in our lives as individual Christians and in our institutional life. We will pray in the words of St Paul, offering *the fears in us that have not yet been cast out by love*. It is in this spirit that we will be able to face an uncertain future unafraid.

These dry bones can live if only …

The readings today remind us that the dead and dried bones that can fossilise our faith and our lives in this world can live, can become a powerful living reality in our lives, but only through the power of God’s Holy Spirit. So too, our lives are not destined to decay and to the stench of the grave. That which was dead in us; that which was lost to the world around us can emerge from the shadow of the tomb into a transformed life, but only as a response to the invitation from Christ – ***come forth***! It will not happen by chance but only through a heart and mind so attuned to the God-within us, to the Christ whose love was so great that he died for us, for our sins, that we strive for lives renewed by hope.