

From our Sentence for today: 'Confess your sins one to another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.' (James 5.16)

In Holy Week each year, it has long been the custom of the Church for the clergy to gather with their bishop at cathedrals all around the world. They renew their ordination vows, break bread together and take back to their churches oil of chrism and oil of healing for the new paschal year, blessed by the bishop at that same service. Not long after he became Archbishop of Perth, Peter Carnley on such a day in the 80's told his clergy, about to renew their vows, the story of the 17 camels.

Somewhere in the Middle East, three Arab brothers sat on a rock forsaken and forlorn, for their dear father had just died and they were in mourning. One of them, the oldest, informed them that he had on his person his father's Will and wanted to share it with them. Their father had left to them his entire estate which comprised 17 camels which were standing together not far off. However, he had apportioned them in a particular mathematical fashion. To the oldest son, he had willed half; to the second he had willed a third and to the last, a ninth. Without so much as a calculator, these 3 sons knew they had a problem. It could be a pretty bloody affair and we're talking mainly camels' blood here! They began to squabble about the number they should receive. The already hot desert day was becoming even more heated. What could they do?

And then, on the distant horizon, one of them spotted something coming. The apparition got closer and they could see it was a man on a camel. Closer and closer he came toward them and to their delight, it was their uncle. Their uncle was known to be a kind and wise man. He alighted from his camel and approached them, saying, "Dear nephews, you look downcast, forsaken, forlorn and anxious; what is troubling you so?" The eldest replied, "O kind and wise uncle, our dear father has died and left to us his estate of 17 camels standing yonder. I get half, my next brother gets a third and the youngest gets a ninth. What can we do?!" "I see your dilemma", said the kind, wise uncle, and I think I have the answer. I will give you my camel." They looked at each other in bewilderment, but then it all became so clear. The eldest proceeded to take 9, the second took 6 and the youngest took 2. Then the kind, wise uncle climbed back on his camel and disappeared into the setting sun.

The Archbishop then looked at his clergy and said, "You are the 18th camel." He was particularly referring to the priestly role of being an instrument of reconciliation. When a priest is ordained, the bishop quotes the words of Jesus in John's Gospel, "Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; whose sins you retain, they are retained." (20.23)

We are all called to personal, mutual and corporate accountability, reconciliation and healing... to have 'salt' in ourselves: authenticity; to be at peace with one another; to have lips and hearts acceptable to God; to confess our shortcomings and be restored. The reality of the human condition is that it has potential on the one hand for great distortion and on the other for sublime sanctification. There is no such thing as private sin. All sin has a ripple effect unless it is faced up to and dealt with. Our goal should be personal and mutual wholeness.

There are three kinds of confession available to the practicing Christian:

- You can confess your sins at any time to God, anywhere, and believe in your heart that you are forgiven. (Under the shower, in the car, in private prayer...)

- In the context of worship, corporate or 'general' confession takes place in the various liturgies of the church, such as the Sunday Eucharist, and the bishop or priest pronounces absolution. That happens here again today.
- By notice or arrangement, a person can make a private confession to a priest. This is known as 'sacramental reconciliation' and is our main focus here.

The old Anglican adage about personal confession and reconciliation is, 'All may, none must, some should'. No one should make a confession under compulsion but with a free, willing and intentional spirit which firmly means to 'do business' with God. It is in the serious coming to grips with sin that the penitent can find real forgiveness, release and acceptance from God and the sheer joy of knowing that the 'slate is clean' and a totally fresh start lies ahead. Furthermore, the confessional is a strictly confidential setting. This is known as the 'seal' of the confessional. The priest is bound by the seal never to divulge any information that has been shared. (The only exceptions involve procedures around child abuse and threats to life.)

Richard Foster wrote, 'The discipline of confession brings an end to pretense. God is calling into being a church that can openly confess its frail humanity and know the forgiving and empowering graces of Christ. Honesty leads to confession, and confession leads to change. May God give grace to the church once again to recover the discipline of confession'. (Celebration of Discipline p 137) It is worth studying pages 774-778 of A Prayer Book for Australia. There are a number of choices in terms of the manner of confession, but the basic process involves an individual penitent confessing sins in the presence of a priest who can then offer counsel and absolution. It is recommended that this become a regular discipline rather than occasional or haphazard. (I try to make a confession at least twice a year and usually before Christmas and Easter) Logistically, this can either occur in the open but private space of a church such as at a prayer desk where a candle could also be lit, or perhaps by arrangement in a 'Quiet Room' or some other mutually approved space.

Often asked questions:

- "Why Private Confession to a priest? Surely I can go straight to God anytime I like?"
Indeed, you can. But even with a priest, the confession is still only to God. (Hence the 18th camel analogy; the priest is just the instrument, then moves on) However, the power of this kind of confession lies in its intentional nature, and the benefit of listening to the counsel of another sinner, and the full assurance of forgiveness given in the words, "Go in peace. The Lord has put away your sin. And pray for me, a sinner".
- "I've heard of people who make their confession, get forgiven, and then do the same things all over again. What's the point of that?" This actually misses the *whole* point. There is meant to be firm contrition and a desire for 'amendment of life' i.e. that the penitent firmly means to change and asks for the grace and strength of God to live in 'newness of life'. Certainly, we can lapse because we are human, but the true intention is to leave sins behind for good.
- "I have never made a confession. I'll be there forever!"
When you make your first confession, if you are an adult, it is a good idea to divide your life up say into childhood, adolescence, late teens, early adulthood and just give a few short sentences about besetting sins or faults that you remember. Then come to the real substance of your life now and what is going on for you now. That is what God is interested in. Then future confessions can be right up to date.

All may, none must, some should.