

CMS Talk on Sin and Forgiveness.

We could say that the whole reason why God became man and Jesus came to Earth was for the forgiveness of sins. John the Baptist prepared the way for Christ by pointing out Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world and these are the same words we use at Mass. He proclaimed to the people loud and clear in the Desert: "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is close at hand. His baptism was a sign of being healed and forgiven from sin.

The angels, in the nativity story announced to the shepherds that "this day a saviour is being born to you. Now this salvation was to be none other than freedom from sin at the heart of which is repentance and subsequent forgiveness.

At the last supper Jesus said, and we repeat

at every Mass the words, "This is my body given up and my blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins".

And of course after the Resurrection he appeared to the disciples and said: "receive the Holy Spirit, those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven, those whose sins you retain, they are retained". At these words Jesus instituted the Sacrament of Penance whereby priests are commissioned to forgive sins in Jesus's name. It is one of the seven sacraments and is also mentioned in the Nicene Creed which we say every Sunday at Mass.

Jesus Himself, of course forgave his executioners from the Cross with the words: "Father forgive them, they know not what they do". Of course the meaning of the Passion and Death of Jesus is that He would stand in the place of the guilty, i.e. us, and atone for our sins, justifying us before the Father, making us righteous, releasing us from the

stranglehold of sin, saving us from the power of the Devil and opening up the way to Eternal Life where sin will be no more. Barabbas and Jesus have the same name; 'Son of the Father'. Here Barabbas stands for us. The guilty Barrabas (us) is reprieved and in his (our) place the innocent (Jesus) is condemned. The innocent Lamb of God is condemned in place of the guilty. It's a bit like St Maximilian Kolbe who offered to take the place of a family man who was sentenced to be hung in Auschwitz in 1944. Jesus has done the same for us.

The core of the teaching of Jesus is the mercy of God which is given to us when we repent of our sins. Stories such as the Prodigal Son, the lost sheep, Zacchaeus, the transformation of Mary Magdalene, the forgiveness of Peter after his denial, the good thief – all these are at the very heart of the mission of Jesus. He said: "I came to call sinners to repentance". What Jesus is saying is that there is a way to break the power which sin has over us and

that is in a through Him.

That's all very fine but we too have an important part to play in claiming and making this forgiveness of Christ effective in our lives. The first words of John the Baptist, the first words of Jesus, the first words of Peter at Pentecost are "Repent". Without repentance on our part there is no forgiveness. The merits of Christ's Passion and Resurrection are applied to us at Baptism but we must activate them. We don't of course earn our own salvation but we must claim it for it to take effect in our souls.

We first of all must call sin by its proper name, own it and confess it, preferably, and especially if it is serious, in the Sacrament of Penance. These days we see long queues for Holy Communion but a minuscule number for confession in comparison. What is that saying? Did sin go out of fashion with Vatican II? Has the modern world since the sixties lost its sense of sin? People often glibly say that

Jesus accepts us as we are. Yes, he loves us so much that he doesn't want us to have any truck with sin. We must change, he is saying, if we want to bask in the forgiveness which he has won for us on the Cross. A good bit of advice is that we much hate the sin and love the sinner, and that includes sin in ourselves. Jesus may accept us as we are but he sure doesn't want us to stay the way we are if we're playing around with sin. Humility means that we own up to our sins head on and 'beat our breasts'.

I think the Confiteor in the new mass mentions us having 'greatly sinned' which a lot of people seem to frown on.

One of the great blockages to the mercy and forgiveness of God in our lives is when we refuse to forgive our neighbour and harden our hearts against him or her. This is brought out in the parable of the unforgiving servant. God can't forgive us if we stubbornly refuse to forgive others. In the one prayer Jesus gave

us it says: "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who sin against us".

I would say that the greatest need in the church today is for people to face up to the reality of sin in their lives and when the Church says that something is against the law of God, we must stop putting our own personal spin on the teaching. How can we be forgiven our sins if we are trying to downplay its reality? Living together, despite what a lot of Catholics say these days, is a sin, abortion is a sin, contraception is a sin, laziness is a sin, impure thoughts and actions are sins, missing mass through negligence is a sin. We, ask Mary as we say in the "Hail Mary" to "pray for us sinners". We need her prayers if we are ever going to repent. Our Lady of Fatima asked the children to add to the rosary the following " O Jesus forgive us our sins and save us from the fires of Hell, lead all souls to Heaven especially those who are most in need of your mercy". That says it all. Someone once said to Padre Pio that he didn't believe in Hell. The saint answered; "you will when you go there".

But don't forget when sins are forgiven they are no more. God will never call them again to mind.

QUESTIONS

1. If people don't say that they are sorry, would we still forgive them or are our hands tied.
2. Sometimes people find it hard to forgive themselves. Is this what happened Judas?
3. You never find Jesus going out of His way to forgive the Pharisees who were continually plotting against him. In fact he said that if they didn't believe in Him

"they would die in the sins".

4. Is there anything which the Church teaches is a sin which you, and indeed many of our contemporaries, would question? Is living in a 'civil partnership' a sin or is it just a legal arrangement to settle rights and entitlements etc - as the Bishop of Nottingham said two years ago.