

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Penitence (Part of Sermon Series on the Liturgy)

**Preached on 5th August 2018, with Proper 13B
readings: Ephesians 4.25-5.2 and John 6.35, 41-51**

As many of you know, Nicola, Ian and I are preaching a series of sermons over the summer about the liturgy how we worship, and why we do and say what we do. This week, we come to the subject of penitence – the confession of our sins, and hearing the words of absolution – which we do in every Eucharist.

I think this is something we should be ready to tell people if we ever get an inkling that they think that Christians regard themselves as better than everyone else: ‘holier than thou’. How can we be like that? The very shape of our worship calls to our minds, again and again, our frailties and our failings. The words we’re given to say assume that we haven’t lived perfect lives since the last time we said them: things have gone wrong, whether we noticed it at the time or not. Also, there will be opportunities for doing good or speaking out which we have missed: as it says in the old Prayer Book’s prayer of confession for Morning and Evening prayer, *‘we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done...’* [In the form of confession which we said today, that reminder of sins of omission is contained in that one words ‘*negligence*’.] St Paul urges us, in the first reading we heard today, to *‘lead a life worthy of the calling to which [we] have been called...’* (Eph. 4:1), and we

haven’t done it – not every moment of every day – let’s be honest – not in thought, word and deed.

Now, being reminded of all this, week by week, could have the very opposite effect from making us feel morally virtuous: it could depress us, make us feel that we’re ‘hopeless cases’, that we never change, and that we can’t be of any value to God or of much use for his purposes. We repeatedly foul things up, or at the very least, infect the good things we *do* do with mixed motives, like a nasty kind of virus. And to some extent, that’s true: if you look inside yourself honestly, I think you’ll find an awful lot of the time we *do* have mixed motives: there’s a bit of self-seeking in even those things which other people congratulate us on as having been very altruistic. I think it’s because of this truth that that Prayer Book Confession I mentioned earlier goes on to say, in rather drastic terms, *‘there is no health in us’*. But all these bracing reminders of the fact that we’re sinners have to be set alongside another set of truths, which are contained in the ‘Words of Absolution’ which the priest says after the prayer of Confession.

These words aren’t just a prayer – that we may be forgiven – although sometimes they’re couched in that form: they contain in their heart something stronger and more powerful even than a prayer : they’re a declaration, a pronouncement. The word ‘absolution’ means ‘release’ or letting go ; the same word is used in the Gospel of John to describe something very physical: when Lazarus was raised to life, and came out of the tomb in his shroud (which took the form of strips of cloth wound around his body and face), Jesus said *‘Unbind him, let him go’* (John 11.44).

It was this same verb, for 'letting go' which the Greek of the Gospel uses to render what he said in the Upper Room after his resurrection; he gave the apostles authority to forgive sins: *'If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven ...'* (John 20.23). In other words, absolution is about separating us from our sins as really as Lazarus was separated from his grave-clothes when they were taken off him. [As many of you have heard me say before from this pulpit, the image of being separated from my sins which strikes home to me, personally, is the verse for Psalm 103: *'As far as the East is from the West, so far has he set our sins from us'* (Psalm 103.12). And it's a fact: in his death on the cross, Jesus has set our sins far from us, released us, let us go; and every time we hear this pronounced and take it to heart, it applies to us, and whatever might be hovering around our consciences.]

Of course, I'm not saying that we're only set free from our sins when we hear a priest pronounce absolution in a church service; we can take the great fact of forgiveness to heart, and place our faith in it in our own prayers and Bible reading.. But it helps us, as a community to hear the truth of forgiveness pronounced, with the degree of solemnity and authority which our liturgy gives it, and to rise up from our knees (really or metaphorically), as people renewed, - freed -with a fresh start.

But all this only deals with one aspect of the Absolution – albeit perhaps the most important. If we go back to the problem that all this reflection on our sinfulness might make us feel that we're utterly unworthy and useless, we find that the Absolution tells us otherwise: it talks about our being 'confirmed and strengthened in all goodness'

[and kept in eternal life]. These words affirm that for all the compromise and infection that sin and self-seeking bring into our life, there is goodness there, too. And we can grow in it. After all, we are made in the image of God.. The Spirit is in the business of restoring in us that image, like a skilled and patient conservator bringing out the colours and brilliancy of what was there all along. I wasn't here before Bartlow church had its mediaeval wall-paintings restored; those of you who have been able to see the 'before' and 'after' may have some idea of what I'm talking about. [

Just as we're probably not fully aware of all our failings and frailties (because full self-awareness is so difficult to achieve, and might be so uncomfortable), so we're surely not fully aware of the ways in which we are growing and changing through God's grace, as we confess our sins and see forgiveness and a new start week by week. Just as other people (perhaps particularly our nearest and dearest) may be much more aware of our weaknesses than we are, so, too, they may be more aware of our growth and change for the better. And perhaps it's all to the good if we find it hard to notice! However much we might attribute all good things to God, if we're *too* aware of our own improvement, the temptation to self-congratulation and the wrong kind of pride is lurking in the wings, to spoil things!. But the *hope* of transformation and growth through the Spirit's power should never be let go of, however deflated we may feel when we do an audit of our own characters and of the sins we keep confessing again and again. It's part of our hope and trust in God to believe that we are, nevertheless, being transformed '*from glory to glory*', as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3.18; or to put it

another way, St John says in his first Epistle speaks of being 'reassured' *whenever our hearts condemn us, for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything*'. (1 John 3.20).

[Now, some of what I'm saying assumes that when we come to say the confession in church on a Sunday, we've thought about what we're confessing. Some of us will have been taught in confirmation class, years ago, that you should spend part of Saturday evening preparing spiritually to receive communion the next day – and this preparation would include a review of one's life, and what you have to confess.

Honestly speaking, I wonder whether any of us nowadays does make such a serious preparation on a Saturday : it might be very good if we did, but I don't see it becoming a general habit again any time soon! Too often, we may spiritually tumble into church from the busyness of our lives, with little reflection on the awe-inspiring thing we're coming to share in.. This is why, as you know, I encourage at least a little bit of quiet reflection before the service. But, even given that, it can be the case that when the confession is announced – in my case at least – my mind goes blank about what sins I'm confessing. What has gone wrong this week? Where have I let God down? One or two things may spring to mind, but hardly a comprehensive overview. The service encourages us to have a space of silence before the confession itself, to get our minds in order – but sometimes that isn't anything like enough. Maybe, if we're in the habit of reviewing our day in front of God every evening – not at length, and not necessarily concentrating on the negatives – but starting with noticing what aspects of the day make us thankful,

and at what moments has God taught us something, then in that context, we become aware of where we haven't been responsive or obedient : this kind of daily practice can make our act of confession on a Sunday, or at any other time, more real, as well as helping us grow spiritually throughout the week.

But if we haven't done this, and if we really are not precisely aware about what we're confessing, the words of the prayer we say together can at least jog our memories as we say it – particularly the prayer we're saying in the 10 o'clock service this . It itemises things in a way that I, personally, find helpful. Sins against God, and against neighbour (though something's missing there –what about our sins against God's good creation?); the causes of context of our sin – negligence, weakness, our own deliberate fault... All these words may bring something to mind, and help us consciously let it go into God's good mercy. But there will always be an element of 'unwitting sin' – things we're not aware of, and things which were mistakes and misunderstandings.. The psalmist talks about those things, too, in Psalm 19.12 and asks for the forgiveness of 'hidden faults'.

WE bring all of this to church – including our own haziness and ignorance about ourselves and the effect of what we do;- we confess it together; and we can firmly believe it's forgiven, and that we are by God's grace on the path of growth, of amendment and transformation of life. The Lord, in his own time and own moments, may choose to show us some those sins we didn't bring to consciousness or fully understand, when we prayed for forgiveness, and having them brought to consciousness,

perhaps through someone else's honesty and anger, will be for our good, even if painful! Even as we're jolted into awareness about something, and feel contrite and ashamed of ourselves, we can also believe that *'as far as the East is from the West, so far has he set our sins from us'*. That's a fact.

And for that blessed fact, asserted week by week in our liturgy, the appropriate response is, of course, 'Thanks be to God!'