

Sermon for Ash Wednesday

A sermon preached at the High Mass in the Chapel of the Resurrection, Pusey House, Oxford, on Wednesday, 14 February 2024 (Ash Wednesday), by The Right Reverend Peter Wheatley, sometime Bishop of Edmonton

Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double-minded. ST. JAMES 4.8

THIS is only the second time that I have entered this Chapel since 1969, but the grounding I received here as an undergraduate has been formative for my life. I was brought here by friends one Sunday and encountered a Sung Mass for almost the first time in my life. I can echo the words of St Augustine: 'the sweet singing of your Church moved me deeply, truth seeped into my heart, and my feelings of devotion overflowed'.¹ As today so then, this was a place of friendship. The then Principal brought me to lunch, and afterwards took me upstairs for coffee in his study and enquired of my life and faith. From that flowed preparation for my first confession. I can still remember the simple admonitions – to recollect sins against God, oneself and one's neighbour, and spend no less than fifteen minutes and no more than forty-five preparing: i.e. remember that it is before God one is coming, but not to become self-obsessed. I also remember that the Principal would prepare himself prayerfully in Chapel and that he was properly vested to celebrate a sacrament of the Church.

Since then, over my life, I can recollect how glad I have been to be able to make my confession – sometimes more because I have really made a mess of things and just want to say sorry to God. It really does feel sometimes as if a weight has been lifted from one's shoulders. On other occasions, I have been in a dilemma about how to behave and how to decide, and laying out one's sins before God, I have been hugely grateful for advice from a wise counsellor. I should add here that it is advice that may be sought. You need to be open to advice,

¹ St Augustine, *Confessions*, IX, 6.

but it is only advice, and nothing shall be done that goes against one's own conscience.

St Teresa of Avila says that in choosing a confessor or spiritual director, look for three qualities: learning, spirituality and experience; and if you have to choose between a learned person and a spiritual person, choose the learned person. She explains herself by saying that a learned person will know their scriptures. The Church's understanding of what sin is - and especially grave sin - is founded simply on the Ten Commandments which we recited today.

Learning is important. We live in a post-Freudian world, and we have needed to integrate fresh understanding of the human personality with the ancient wisdom of the Church. Indeed, I have often thought that W.H. Auden's obituary of Freud bears close resemblance to what can happen in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, especially a first confession or when one is dealing with a disturbing pattern of repeated behaviour.

'He wasn't clever at all: he merely told
the unhappy Present to recite the Past
like a poetry lesson till sooner
or later it faltered at the line where

long ago the accusations had begun,
and suddenly knew by whom it had been judged,
how rich life had been and how silly,
and was life-forgiven and more humble,

able to approach the future as a friend
without a wardrobe of excuses, without
a set mask of rectitude or an
embarrassing over-familiar gesture.'
(In Memory of Sigmund Freud)

Given my self-centredness, only much later have I come to appreciate and be thankful that a priest gives precious time to me to hear my confession and give counsel. Later still, I have come to see that I am not at the centre of this sacrament. Private confession may be a

misnomer – priests who hear confession are under a solemn obligation not to disclose what is said, as is the penitent, unless it is agreed what may be said outside the confession. Priests of my acquaintance went to prison in South Africa under apartheid for refusal to disclose anything which they may or may not have heard in confession. But it is not a private sacrament. God and Jesus and his Church are at the centre of all sacraments. I may or may not feel better for making my confession, but I am doing so as a baptised member of the Church, so that this member of the Church may be purified and the whole Church may become stronger from my restoration to my proper place among the redeemed.

We are part of a team, called the Church. Like a football team, we need to train. On Ash Wednesday, we take a chance to look at the training we need. At the start of training for the season, the team often needs to lose some weight gained during the summer. Our Ash Wednesday liturgy helps us to feel the weight of sin and sorrow. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double-minded. 'Cleanse your hands': there's a sense that our sins are a blot on the landscape of the Church. 'Ye double-minded': the Revised English Bible has 'You whose motives are mixed, see that your hearts are pure.', but double-minded may be more profound.

'Lord Jim' is the title of one of Joseph Conrad's novels. It is about a young man who dreams of heroic adventures at sea, but when faced in a becalmed sea with the knowledge that the ship is leaking, at night he and the ships' officers silently abandon ship, leaving the passengers to their fate. The abandoned ship and passengers are rescued, and Jim's reputation then hounds him from port to port as he journeys further and further remotely east. He will not face up to what he has done, but a wise observer remarks:

'It is my belief no man ever understands quite his own artful dodges to escape from the grim shadow of self-knowledge.'

We are complex human beings, shot through with mystery. 'Who will deliver me from this body of death?' cries St Paul, with the immediate answer, 'Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.'²

We are called to penitence. How loving and charitable are we? How honest and truthful? I am sorry, God, but I know you love me. The Sacrament of Penance, of Reconciliation is always open to us. Whether we avail ourselves of it or not, the picture before us this day is ever of the Father on the lookout for the return of the Prodigal Son. That's why the fundamental of today's Mass is that we are thankful. God loves us. 'Draw nigh to God and he will draw nigh to you.'

² Romans 7:24-25.