

## **7<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (B09)**

### **Faith and Forgiveness**

There was an engaging picture of the Leader of the Conservative Party and his wife on the front of my wife's newspaper last Monday under the caption "Dressed for hard times". They had dressed down to attend a children's film premiere and they were posing, not to avoid being noticed, but to be noticed differently.

As we approach Lent, which begins next Wednesday, the Church does some of that dressing down in the liturgy to draw our attention to the fact that we are moving into a different season and we should therefore make a change to our mind set. So, today, we have heard the last of the Alleluia and the Gloria until the Easter Vigil (except for two important feasts of St. Joseph on 19 March and The Annunciation on 25 March). We will also be taking away the flowers and simplifying the music (I hope) for the whole of Lent. This is the Church's way of helping us to focus on the essentials of our faith and our relationship with God and each other. What better way then could there be to approach Lent than to be prompted, as we are by today's readings, to focus on faith, forgiveness and healing.

Over the past few weeks we have seen Jesus confronting demons and driving them out of the man possessed; attending to the needs of large crowds and responding to the leper's request by touching him and identifying with him as an outcast, as well as curing him.

This week, Jesus is again besieged by crowds so that the carriers of the paralytic can't get near. But so strong is their faith that they are undeterred and take bold measures. Jesus sees their faith and acknowledges it by forgiving the sins of the paralytic and restoring

him to full health. In doing so he creates a problem for the religious leaders but not for the people.

We are those people witnessing, as we hear the word, to the fact that Jesus can bring us forgiveness and healing. The question for us, perhaps, is 'Do we have faith in him and his power to heal and forgive us, that is as strong as those crowds and individuals portrayed in the gospel?' And what sort of forgiveness and healing are we talking about?

Many of us will have experienced the pain that comes from seriously falling-out with someone and the cross-words that hurt a relationship. Hopefully, we will also have experienced the sheer joy and relief that comes from settling a difference and remaking that relationship. I think you will agree that it is a wonderful feeling to be released from a situation that weighs us down with concern and worry.

It is precisely that same joy, that same unburdening and that same remaking of a relationship that Jesus offers in the forgiving of our sins and restoring us to the person he wants us to be. And we find all of that made available to us in the Sacrament of Reconciliation – the sacrament of forgiveness and healing – which he gave to his disciples for our benefit.

I would dare to suggest that there is not one of us who is not in some way in need of God's mercy and healing. The aim of Jesus in the miracles we have shared with him today and in recent weeks, is to heal and restore us. He wants us to be better able to fulfil God's purpose for each and everyone of us. God's intention is that we should all be fully human and fully alive. The Sacrament of Reconciliation enables us to walk freely towards that goal.

In the context of a Lenten journey this healing and restoring of our inner self will, I believe, enable us to think more clearly about the weeks ahead. It will help us to have a clearer vision of our everyday need to give time to God in prayer. It will help us to see the

need to deny ourselves of some of our favourite things. It will help us to recognise the need to share something of ourselves and our possessions with those who have greater needs than ours. All of which have an important place in our Lenten reflections.

If you are doubting the need for Reconciliation or having difficulty in approaching this Sacrament of forgiveness, just take another look at the paralytic in today's Gospel. He simply lies paralysed on his stretcher unable to help himself. Many of us have felt just like that at times, paralyzed and helpless, but, as with the paralytic, others have then brought us to Jesus by their encouragement and prayers. We will have Reconciliation Services later in Lent to give us that same opportunity as a community to support each other in seeking God's mercy and healing.

As the priest blesses us with Ashes on Wednesday and says to us "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel", he will be inviting us to leave the past in those ashes and turn to the God who waits with open arms to forgive us and love us into eternity.

Lent is many things but it is particularly a God-given time to forgive and to be forgiven. I pray that we will make the most of it together.