

# Faith Seeking Understanding

Lent 2010

## Prayer of Confession / Repentance

by Canon J O Mann (St John the Evangelist, Malone)

I am aware as I begin this talk, that it will be very easy to leave us all this evening a little down and introspective, because of our subject matter, which fairly naturally brings to mind our inconsistencies, failures and sins and our need to acknowledge that we fall far short of our own expectations of Christian discipleship, let alone of the example of our Lord and of the wonder and glory of God. But prayers of confession and repentance are also the key to release and freedom and when rightly directed turn our glance from ourselves to Christ. Let us see tonight as fundamentally an opening of a way, not a closing, a finding rather than a losing of a channel of Divine grace and a step forward on the pilgrim way, rather than a pause or a step back.

The title of this talk has varied between the “prayer of confession” and the “prayer of repentance”, even as the clergy drew up the plans for this series of focused evenings of prayer, we were inclined to interchange the words. Perhaps we ought to iron that one out to begin with because they are really terms that are the opposite sides of the same coin. A prayer of confession is a prayer admitting guilt, a prayer of repentance is a prayer indicating remorse. At least, from the dictionary definitions of the words that is the

case. But guilt and remorse, the feelings, the emotions with which we articulate the prayer, though different things in essence and may possibly be experienced separately, are religiously and spiritually companions in the life of prayer. I would like to come back to these emotions in a moment when we look at the two readings which we have heard tonight, but first let us touch, very briefly, on the way in which our traditions deal with these things. Because, of all the modes of prayer that we are considering this Lent this is the one in which liturgically we may be at greatest odds, I want to spend most of the time sharing with you how I see the inner effects of confession and repentance, rather than what our churches may teach in terms of the way we go about it, but let us briefly think of how our traditions bring formal prayers of confession and repentance to our attention.

We may confess our sins before God, knowing ourselves to be in the presence of our Lord, but verbally articulate our confession to one another and repent of our sins with specific reference to what we see to be those sins. That person may be a priest, or it may be a lay person, we may receive guidance and feel the need to undertake some penance or not as the case may be. So the

prayer of confession may, whether or not it includes another person, have different outcomes; from the lonely and singular operation of one human heart communing with God in a state of seeking renewal and restitution, to the sharing of pain and sorrow for sin with another as the next few steps on the pilgrim path are discussed or directed with another.

Confession to a priest within Anglicanism, though clearly experienced primarily on the Anglo-Catholic wing, is a recognised and accepted part of liturgical life. We have a little ditty for those who want to know whether or not a member of the Church of Ireland should confess to a priest, it runs, very helpfully and in good Anglican style quite openly: “All can, none must, some should”. A compromise position which values the place of a prayerful confession before a priest and recognises its importance, but acknowledges that very many, in fact the vast majority of Anglicans, and certainly at least 99% of members of the Church of Ireland, will never even consider confessing in this way.

For most of us I should imagine that we consider confession, in so far as we do it together in Church, to be part of the liturgy of the holy communion service. There is a penitence part, whether wholly or partially conducted by the minister or priest that we connect with. This may involve hearing the ten commandments, or the beatitudes or most

often, the summary of the law, or using a fixed set of words, or silence for the reflection of someone on sorrow for sin and the desire to live a more worthy Christian life. It may involve the penitential kyries: “Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy” and it may or may not include a declaration of absolution. Because liturgically speaking we do things in different ways, but we believe to the same basic effect, I want to pass from these liturgical thoughts of difference in practice to the more significant spiritual and Scriptural teaching that underlie how and why we pray prayers of confession and why we turn in repentance to Christ for a new beginning.

For this purpose I have chosen two readings. There are many others that I could have used, but let us begin with the Parable of the Prodigal Son. This is one of the most familiar passages of all the Christian Scriptures. It speaks of a homecoming after a period of serious aberration by a young man whose search for fulfilment in life has caused huge hurt to his family and to himself. Sometimes these days the Parable is subtitled “The Parable of the Loving Father”, or even “The Parable of the Elder Brother”, such that it seems to be three parables rolled into one, and our attention may be cast upon either one of the three main characters of the story. Fundamentally, whatever we may wish to read into it in addition, it is the story of a young man who has gone wrong and is

in desperate straits, so much so that comes to see that however he may be received he must go back, return to those who love him and seek mercy. He does not hope for forgiveness, he does not seek restitution, but he yearns for a taste, a tiny fraction, a fragment of the life he so callously, carelessly and stupidly, with no thought for the hurt he was inflicting on his father, gave up.

Let us pause there for a moment and consider what we feel inside when we come to confess, when we come to repent. What is your primary emotion? Is it guilt? Do you feel, like the prodigal a sense that you are condemned, should be condemned and will remain condemned until you have received forgiveness? Is it sorrow? Do you feel, again like the prodigal that you have abused the love and trust of those who continue to love and trust you. In other words, you don't so much feel guilty of doing something wrong, but sorry for letting someone down. There is as fine a line between these things as there is between confession and repentance, but it is not an insignificant line. Let me draw it for you a little more precisely. It is all to do with whether we imagine God to be primarily a God of justice or primarily a God of mercy. Now there is a big question for you on an ordinary Tuesday evening in Lent. But think about it, God is both of these things and concerned for both of these things, but if we if we are praying, seeking forgiveness

from a sense of guilt we are seeing in God his judgemental side; the side that longs for justice in a world of injustice, who needs his Church to plead for the downtrodden and abused, who yearns for the perfect law of love to be carved in the hearts of all people. We are guilty before such a God, because we know our own condemnation and need forgiveness to be picked up and re-enter the fray in a world that cries out for an end to poverty and a tragically unjust world community. But if we are praying our prayer of confession from a deep seated sense of sorrow, we are seeing in God one who is not primarily condemning us for being guilty of sin, but is hurt and abused and forsaken by a disciple, a trusted follower who has failed him. The first, the guilt route to confession and repentance, is impersonal, objective and seeks in renewal to galvanise the disciple into new and energetic action; to receive forgiveness and go on, there is work to be done, there is a kingdom to build; the second, the route of sorrow, is deeply relational, there is a slower path to renewal; a searching, longing, how can what I have broken ever be mended, appeal to our Lord, to forgive and heal and so restore the disciple to a life of service itself bound up with these things.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son, in terms of the mode of his return to his father, places the younger Son firmly in the latter bracket. He may feel guilty, but primarily he is sorrowful. Above all he is looking for mercy.

In the famous Rembrandt painting entitled, “The Return of the Prodigal Son” which resides in the Hermitage in St Petersburg, and which will be familiar to those who have read Henri Nouwen’s book of the same name, the younger son is depicted with his clothes and shoes in tatters and with his shaved head resting against his father’s chest, against his heart, a supplicant in deep and profound fragility of soul. It is a wonderful depiction of the son in his father’s arms, cradled, comforted, held in a merciful and loving embrace. It didn’t happen like the picture shows us with the elder son looking on and the younger on his knees in this way, but it looks so right, there is no doubt that we can feel that it is right. This is mercy, not justice that we are witnessing; repentance rather than confession. The son’s first words are not “forgive me father for I have sinned”, but “father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” He is not asking for forgiveness, he is hoping for mercy. Do you see the difference? Whether he is actually forgiven or not, does not come into it at that moment; he probably feels quite beyond forgiveness in the sense that justice can never be done and recompense made, this is an approach made within a relationship of love; it is intimate, it is not primarily concerned with guilt and wrongdoing and profligacy and immorality. It is concerned with the crying heart of a broken human relationship.

It is that word “father” that wells up from deep within him that is the first thing he utters, then comes the admission of sin, but first there is the appeal to a relationship of love and then the acknowledgement that he has broken that tie and his sorrow is acute.

What does the father do, he runs to him, embraces him and kisses him and he sends for a robe. Most translations have it as “the best robe”, but literally it means “the first robe”. Could this be the first of his son’s robes that will be to hand as the last he cast off when he left home? This his old robe, comforting, homely, his own recognised robe from a previous life – the beginning of a restoration. Metropolitan Anthony Bloom makes that suggestion in his wonderful book, “meditations on a theme”. I think the Eastern Church has so much to say to us all in the west on this subject of confession and repentance this evening. The Western Church it too consumed with guilt and we are too ready to turn our eyes upon ourselves and keep them there; to examine ourselves and see how we do not measure up to the Christian standards that we fear the gates of hell more than we glimpse the gates of heaven. As I see it the Orthodox Church, whilst thoroughly conscious of sin, turns its eyes to the Father and prays to Christ for mercy. There are many wonderful things for us to learn from the spiritual classic from the nineteenth century, translated by R.M. French, called, “The Way of a Pilgrim” and

from the use of the “Jesus Prayer” as suggested by Fr Eugene last week, and from this book that I am recommending to you tonight.

Listen to this sentence when comparing our way of dealing with sin and that of Christ, Anthony Bloom writes, “How different Christ’s way is to our own horrible gift of looking through layers of transparency, of translucence and of light, the equivocal twilight of human imperfection or the darkness of a still unenlightened but rich internal chaos”. I had to take that sentence and go for a good brisk walk, after spending a few minutes with the dictionary. What is he saying here? As we pray our prayers of confession and repentance we are shedding light, we have the gift of shedding light, we have minds that are shedding light, but we are looking through a transparency, even a translucency at our human imperfections, which he identifies with an “equivocal twilight” – an ambiguous transition between light and darkness – or even further into a real darkness that he describes as a “rich internal chaos”. Is it with such a confusion that we come before God? Maybe not on the surface, as the Prodigal was simply seeking the best of two options and wanted to satisfy his hunger – a very simple task, but beyond that, within the simplicity of that clear aim; the “rich internal chaos”, the “equivocal twilight” of his human imperfections was all to be worked through, but he started with

turning his eyes and heart towards the one who continued to love him through all of this, and he said, “Father”, “I have sinned against heaven and before you, I am no longer worthy to be called your son”.

Now let us turn from the restoration of the Prodigal, the cry of the heart to the mercy and love of God and let us enter the Garden of Gethsemane. It is in this garden, this olive grove, this place of oppressive spiritual turmoil that the heart of Jesus is exposed and the inadequacies of the disciples so brought to the fore. In the garden were four disciples, James and John, Simon Peter and Judas Iscariot. We know this from the other Gospels although it is only Judas who is mentioned by name in St Luke’s account. These four disciples represented an interesting range of sins: James and John, pride in seeking the highest places in our Lord’s favour, Simon Peter in denial as he sought to save himself and Judas Iscariot whose infamous kiss sealed our Lord’s betrayal. That kiss is the epitome of everything that the kiss of the father of the prodigal son was not. **The prodigal was kissed because he was accepted, held in love, restored and forgiven; Jesus was kissed because he was rejected, held in fear, torn from his followers and friends and accused.** Simon Peter learnt that what he, later in the courtyard of the high priest, said and did was wrong and he sought through anguish and tears to re-find his way.

Judas did understand what he had done, but saw his sin as irredeemable – he loses all hope and kills himself. Peter is fundamentally sorrowful, having let down the one he loves, he is filled with remorse and repents of what he has done; what he seeks is the restoration of a relationship, that restoration he receives at the lakeside after our Lord's Resurrection; Judas, though remorseful also, is at heart consumed with guilt; he had taken money to betray his master; his guilt actually measured in thirty pieces of silver, Saint Matthew underlying just how the money had to be used afterwards, this is a matter of justice, of formal correction of a wrongful deed.

Had I been asked for a third reading for tonight, I would have chosen Hosea chapter six, ending with verse six: "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings". God is a God of justice, just as much as he is a God of mercy, but when we pray our prayer of repentance; when we confess our sins, when we come before God seeking his forgiveness; let us look to his mercy, let us turn from our "rich internal chaos" and simply seek our Father's love; let us be Peter and the Prodigal and

Hosea in our outlook and then know from our experience of Jesus Christ, that his love is wider than our furthest sight and deeper than human imagination can reach. **We may feel guilty, but we don't pray from guilt; we pray from sorrow; *we may feel like just dwelling on our own imperfections, but we don't pray from our imperfections we pray from love; we may feel that we can never be forgiven, but we pray from the knowledge that Christ has died for our sins and ever lives to intercede for us. We may feel overseen by a God who demands justice, but we pray to a God who offers mercy and receives us in love.*** We cannot remake the past, live in it or change its consequences, but we can repent and confess and listen more closely to the heartbeat of God, as the Prodigal in Rembrandt's wonderful painting rests his head, turned in grief, but lying in acceptance against his father's chest.

Let me finish with a last few words from Anthony Bloom, "..... we can start on our road back with the word, "Father" – not "Judge" on our lips, with a confession of sin and a hope that nothing has been able to destroy".