

HOMILY EASTER SUNDAY 3 B – Homily 02*
“Living and Proclaiming Repentance”
(Acts 3:13-15; 17-19; 1 Jn 2:1-5; Lk 24:35-48)

Are you living, or resisting, the Word of God?

Today, the third Sunday of Easter, we are commanded to repent, and to proclaim repentance, as the way to the new life of Easter.

The teaching in the readings today can be a challenge to a world that seems no longer to believe in sin nor in repentance. Yet the teaching is clear – repentance is the way to the new life of Easter. May this Word of God help us to deepen our understanding of the Sacrament of Reconciliation within the Church.

First, the readings drive home the message and call us to believe that Jesus is truly risen. We first hear that He appeared to the disciples on the road to Emmaus where he showed them that all scripture leads to the event of his death and resurrection. Then he revealed himself to them at the breaking of the bread. Later Jesus appears to the Twelve and their friends. They touch him and he eats fish. He chides them for doubting and reminds them again that the scriptures all lead to this moment of his resurrection. We must believe beyond a doubt that Jesus is truly risen from the dead.

Second, we are taught that his death and resurrection are all about forgiveness. On the cross he forgave those who crucified him. Now he is forgiving his own disciples who denied and abandoned him. The first reading shows the understanding of Jesus that they acted out of ignorance and were indeed forgiven.

Third, we are taught that this forgiveness is available only through repentance. The forgiveness is present, but we must receive that forgiveness through repentance. In the first reading, Peter states clearly that the Jews who killed Jesus *must repent therefore and turn to Jesus so that their sins may be wiped out*. Even though through the death and resurrection of Jesus they are forgiven, they cannot receive that forgiveness until they repent.

Fourth, the followers of Jesus in the gospel are given a strong clear mandate to go out and proclaim this repentance as the way to forgiveness to all

nations. In Jesus' own words, *repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in my name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses to this.* They were, and we are to be, witnesses to the truth that the way to the new life of Easter is through genuine, heartfelt repentance. What more convincing do we need?

This mandate has serious implications for our sophisticated, modern and post-modern society of today, a society that has become used to living by its own rules and not necessarily the will of God nor the teachings of the Church. That is why this homily began with the question, are we living, or resisting, the Word of God?

We have just heard the meaning of the Word of God in the readings today clearly spelled out. Repentance is the way to the new life of Easter. How willing are we to do the hard work of repenting, or are we as the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous says, seeking an easier, softer way?

We are fortunate in the Catholic Church to have the gift of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This remains one of the best ways to genuinely repent. However, that sacrament seems to have fallen into disfavour and disuse, perhaps because we don't really understand it. Perhaps we need a renewal of this sacrament. Allow me to provide a brief review of what that sacrament involves.

We call it the Sacrament of Reconciliation because that is what it is all about – a process of forgiveness and healing leading to reconciliation with God, those we have hurt, ourselves and even all of God's creation. Here are the steps involved in a genuine celebration of this sacrament.

The first step is contrition, a genuine, heartfelt sorrow for having said what we did and acted in ways that offended others. Or perhaps we neglected to do what we should have done, or did not say what needed to be said. Coupled with this sorrow and contrition should be a sincere desire to change, to never sin in that way again.

The second step is an examination of conscience. This is a *searching and fearless moral inventory*, a shining of the light of our conscience and God's truth and justice into the dark and hidden corners of our life. Before we turn our life over to the care of God, we must take a picture of that life; take a good hard look at it.

Psychologists tell us that we can react to the threat of danger in our lives by fighting, fleeing or perhaps just freezing. In all these ways of reacting to protect ourselves from further hurt, we hurt others, our God and even ourselves. This is what we need to own up to and deal with in our lives.

The third step is a sincere confession and receiving absolution. We share our story, our acting out, our specific words, thoughts, actions or omissions, our sins that have hurt others and fallen short of the mark. The biblical definition of sin is *harmatia*, to “fall short of the mark.” It is to be less than human, or perhaps to try to be more than human, instead of being fully human as God wants us to be.

In this step we admit to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs. This is a courageous act of humble faith. It is an experience of acceptance by another human being, a moment of great intimacy, an experience of the love of God made flesh through a human encounter. This is a beginning of soaking up the love of God that God has been waiting to lavish on us, in a very incarnational manner, which is how God wants to work in our lives for our own wellness and well-being.

Traditionally, we express our sorrow with a prayer, an Act of Contrition. Then we hear those beautiful words of absolution, *I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit*. This is genuine repentance at work, the will of God being accomplished in our lives, a source of peace and joy that is the beginning of the Reign of God.

The fourth step is to pray for healing. Unfortunately, this step has been almost forgotten, ignored, glossed over in the history of penance within the Church. Perhaps this is why many people are falling away from the practice of confession. Without this step, the danger is that the sacrament becomes stale ritual and repetitive rote, ineffectual and ultimately boring externalism without any genuine change, transformation or healing. How sad, when just the opposite is what should be happening.

This is where we are invited to go beyond the actions, to why we did those sinful actions. What painful emotions or negative attitudes made me act out and sin in the first place? Was it human insecurity, anger, jealousy, lust, a need for power and control, an addiction? If I don't go deeper and weed out these roots of sin, this sinfulness (that which makes us sin), then we are

putting ourselves at risk of repeating the same sinful behaviour all over again, and that is life-draining, not life-giving.

I would invite you to ask the priest with whom you are celebrating this sacrament, to pray for healing for you in whatever way that you feel that you need healing. That adds a deeper dimension to the celebration that is truly life-giving and makes it a life-changing experience that it is meant to be.

The fifth step is to do penance, to try to make amends. This action ties in with the desire to never sin in this way again. It should involve an apology to the ones whom we have hurt, including a declaration to never do that hurtful action again. It should include the willingness to listen to the pain of the one who was offended by our actions. Soaking up that person's pain and allowing them an opportunity to empty themselves of their pain is a way of inviting them to begin to forgive you. Now that is commitment to change, and that should be part of every celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation.

The last step is, naturally, reconciliation. That is the goal and the ideal. That may or may not happen with regard to the people that we have hurt. If the apology is sincere; the offer to make amends genuine; and the offended person is ready to forgive, then reconciliation happens. In fact, the relationship can not only be restored, it can become even stronger than it was before because of the amount of love and forgiveness that has been demonstrated and lived between two people. That is the meaning of the passage of scripture where a woman pours ointment over the feet of Jesus and wipes his feet with her hair. Jesus' comment about her is that she must have been forgiven much to be showing so much love.

Even if the offended person is not willing to forgive us, we are still reconciled with God and with ourselves. We are free from guilt and fear and can move on with our lives in peace and even joy, staying open for the possible reconciliation that may come in the future if and when the other person is ready to let go of their own resentment.

I really believe that this process of reconciliation is what the readings today are all about. We are invited to enter into this process of repentance for any sins that we may have committed. As followers of Jesus, we are also commanded and mandated to go out and proclaim this repentance for the forgiveness of sins to all nations.

I can look back to a key celebration of reconciliation as one of the roots of my own priestly vocation. As a university student, I had let down a partner in business by my cavalier attitude towards my role in the business. When I left university and the business to travel with the singing group *Up With People*, I got a letter from him stating that unless I smartened up, our friendship would end there.

I was shocked and filled with remorse as I learned that my actions had caused him to declare bankruptcy. I was in the States at the time, unable to contact him. I was also not happy, confused as to what I was to do with my life. And now, for the first time, I really tasted sin as harming a friendship. I went to church that Sunday, confessed my sin and received communion with the firm resolve to make up the harm that I had done. I walked out of that church a changed person. The other members of the cast noticed the change in me immediately. One even asked me what had happened to me. How could I explain that I had just experience the power of the sacrament of Reconciliation?

Whereas days earlier I was tempted to leave the church and join the Southern Baptists who were courting me, I now knew that I had no need to leave the Church. Everything was there, in the Church. I just had to dig deeper, take the dust off the sacraments, and live my life as a Catholic more fully. I left the group after seven months of touring and returned to work for my friend in his new business without salary for two months. After our relationship was solidly re-established, I followed the pull of the Holy Spirit to the Oblate Novitiate in Arnprior, Ontario. I am convinced that this experience of God's forgiveness and my reconciliation with my friend through the sacrament of Reconciliation is at the roots of my vocation to the priesthood.

There is a House of Peace in Winnipeg where a number of priests go every day for a certain number of hours just to hear confessions and celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation with all kinds of penitents who come there for that purpose. It is truly a place of peaceful joy, and the priests who volunteer their time there, like Oblate Fathers Dominique Kerbrat and Albert Lafrenière, are also a special joyful group. I have seen that joy in him when he sets out for that ministry, or returns from it, when I stay at the Oblate residence on Gertrude Street. It is this peace and joy that I desire for all of us in our archdiocese.

The Eucharist that we celebrate today is itself the prime sacrament of forgiveness. In the penitential rite, we profess our need for forgiveness. We are washed clean by God's Word and we receive the very Body and Blood of Jesus who is forgiveness and gives us the power as Church to forgive sins. And we are missioned, sent out to be ambassadors of reconciliation.

So as we celebrate this third Sunday of Easter, let us live the Word of God, repent of our own sins, and proclaim this repentance as the way to the new life of Easter to all we meet.