

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Sunday 21st December 2014

“And he went into all the region about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (today’s Gospel, Luke 3).

For the third week in a row, the liturgy brings us once again that last and greatest of all the prophets – I would almost call him the ‘patron saint of Advent’ – St. John the Baptist. Crying out in the desert, ‘Make ready the way of the Lord,’ St. John reminds us of the necessity of penance in preparing for the coming of the Lord: whether it is the coming of Our Lord at Christmas or that ultimate coming of the Lord when each of us will be called from this life and judged as we enter eternity. “Watch ye therefore, because you know not the day nor the hour” (Mt 25:13). By renewing the call to penance, today’s Gospel, therefore, involves us to think seriously, if we have not done so already, about our Advent confession. As you know, the sacrament of penance contains three parts, three things that are required of us when we receive this sacrament: contrition, confession and satisfaction. These three conditions are known as the *acts of the penitent*. (Incidentally, the “penitent” is the person going to confession; the “confessor” is the priest administering the sacrament.) This sacrament exists to set us free from the sins we have committed. That explains the three parts of the sacrament: we regret our sins (*contrition*), we confess them to the priest, Christ’s representative (*confession*), and we are ready to do penance for them (*satisfaction*). In the light of Saint John’s mission of “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,” let us say a few words today about this first part of the sacrament, known as contrition or, more broadly, simply as *penance*.

True Contrition is an absolutely essential part of making a good confession. Contrition is the sincere sorrow for our sins, together with the firm purpose of amendment. God does not force his mercy on anyone, and without sincerely regretting our sins, even God himself could not forgive them: not because of any weakness on his part, but because we are unwilling to accept his forgiveness. Our contrition must above all be supernatural: that is, based on religious and not purely human motives. The man who regrets robbing a bank because he is subsequently sent to jail has a purely natural sorrow: this is not the supernatural contrition necessary for a good confession.

Our contrition is called perfect contrition when we are sorry for our sins purely, or at least primarily, because we have offended God, and not because of

the punishments which our sins have deserved. When circumstances make it impossible actually to receive the sacrament of penance (in a sinking ship, in the field of battle ...), *perfect contrition*, based on charity or love of God above all things, is enough to put the sinner back in the state of grace assuming of course that this contrition is joined to the intention of receiving the sacrament as soon as possible. A person who *can* get to confession but who refuses to do so by definition does *not* have perfect contrition. *Imperfect contrition*, on the other hand, is based on a more selfish motive: we regret our sins because we realise that they have earned for us the loss of heaven and the pains of hell or purgatory. But even imperfect contrition is still supernatural, since it is based on the truths of faith which God has revealed to us and not on merely natural considerations. Although imperfect contrition on its own is not enough to secure the pardon of our sins, it is a sufficient disposition for receiving this sacrament validly. Even if we do not regret our sins solely out of the offence they cause to the majesty of God, we can still be forgiven in confession with sincere, supernatural albeit imperfect contrition.

Although we do not need to feel our sorrow emotionally, we must form a resolution of the will to detest our sins and avoid them in the future. We must firmly regret every mortal sin we may have committed. “Whosoever shall keep the whole law, but offend in one point, is become guilty of all” (Jas 2:10). Just as a person cannot be “almost alive,” so also a soul cannot be “almost” in a state of grace: either we love God and regret all our sins or we do not. We should not be discouraged if having true contrition for our sins sometimes seems difficult. Contrition itself is an actual grace which God, in his mercy, freely grants to all those who ask. As much as we may wish to grow in holiness, God wants it even more than we do, and he is always there to help us along the way. Even if, after a devout confession, we eventually fall into the same sins again, we should never hesitate to turn again to God and renew our contrition.

An important part of contrition is the *firm purpose of amendment*. If we are truly sorry for our sins then naturally we will wish to avoid them in the future. The purpose of amendment is simply the intention to reform our lives and avoid sin in the future. Through contrition we must form the intention to sin no more. A student who confesses having cheated on a test is not sincere, if he intends to cheat again tomorrow. We must also avoid the near occasion of sin. Scripture tells us, “he who loves danger shall perish in it” (Eccl 3:27). An *occasion of sin* is any person, place or thing which tends to lead us into sin. A near occasion of sin is one which could easily be avoided and in which we are likely to fall. For

example, for a person prone to drunkenness, a pub would be a near occasion of sin. We must seek to know ourselves well enough to realise what situations are likely to be a temptation for us; we must not recklessly expose ourselves to such situations.

Let us turn to Saint John, not just as some great figure from religious history, but as a great saint who looks down on us from heaven and who wants nothing more than to continue his mission of helping to prepare for Christ's coming into our hearts. Through his example and intercession, may we turn with confidence to Christ who took on our human nature in Mary's womb precisely so that he could offer himself one day in sacrifice to save us from our sins, if only we will let him. As we sing every day in Advent at the office of Vespers: *Who, that thou mightst our ransom pay, And wash the stains of sin away, Wouldst from a Virgin's womb proceed, And on the cross a victim bleed.*