

Confession – Stay Awake

We don't begin Advent by listening to readings about angels appearing to people, or even with John the Baptist's voice crying in the wilderness. Instead, the Church starts Advent with a simple but urgent command from Jesus: "Stay awake and be ready to meet the Lord when he comes."

Even when John the Baptist appears next week, it will be to offer a baptism for the forgiveness of sins, so that people can be ready to meet Jesus when his public ministry begins. And so, one of the ways we can prepare to encounter Christ is by examining our hearts and confessing our sins, and Confession is what I'd like to preach about for the next two weeks.

It's important to try and have a healthy understanding of Confession. It's easy to look at it in what I would call a negative way, in the sense of what it takes away, like a washing machine taking away the dirt. The problem with that view is obvious: if I see Confession only as something that takes away sin and guilt, and I don't feel those things, I may think I don't need Confession.

But it's better to look at Confession in a positive light: not only what it removes, but what it gives.

Confession is one of the seven sacraments where we encounter God's mercy that fills us again with his grace. That grace is the strength we need to resist temptation and grow in holiness.

I read that karma is getting the bad we deserve; grace is receiving the good we don't deserve. In Confession, God pours his grace into us again and again.

I love analogies, and with Confession a helpful analogy could be to think of an MOT or a service check. When you bring your car in, it's not because you want someone to list all its faults. It's because you want it to run well. You trust the mechanic to spot what needs attention and to reassure you that it's safe to drive, that the crucial parts are working well. So, a good confession isn't just about things we've done but also about things we should be doing but aren't. That's why I often ask people how their prayer life is, for example—something we should all be doing.

I'm not saying that the priest is a mechanic who fixes you up. The real work happens between you and Christ. I realised that properly for the first time when someone came to confession and was reading their sins from a piece of paper and got emotional, and her tears fell onto the paper, and I'd not said a word. That also shows Confession isn't a magic box where you go in, maybe superficially list some things you've done, the priest says some words, and then, presto, your sins disappear. God does most of the work, but we play our part too.

So, the very human analogies I used earlier—washing machine and MOT—though they might get rid of the negative and untrue images we might have of Confession, can't capture all that Confession is.

One of Pope Francis' early famous quotes was that "The confessional is not a torture chamber, but the place of the Lord's mercy." It's a place where we're built up, and we leave it reassured of God's mercy and certain that the past has been forgiven. In previous homilies I've spoken about how Jesus offers us the chance to live a new, better life. And he himself tells us in John 10:10 that he came so that we might have life and have it to the full. Confession is one of the ways that we become more alive.

Think of the Prodigal Son. When he comes back home, he sees his father and starts saying how he's sinned. But his father stops him and embraces him. And then, most relevantly for this homily, the father says, "My son was dead, and now he's alive again." (Luke 15:24) Through the son's confession, he can start living this new life—very different from the life he had been living while far away from the father's house, and even different from the life he lived before he ran away.

Another helpful analogy of Confession is the window analogy. Sunlight is always shining, but if the window is smudged or covered in dust, less light enters the room. Similarly, God is always sending us his light, his help, his strength, his grace. But if we never clean the window, we block what God wants to pour into our lives.

So even if you don't think you commit so-called big sins, Confession isn't just about that. When you see people going every month or two, it's not mainly because of big sins, but

because they've learned how much easier life is when they keep the window clean and let God's grace pour in.

In the spiritual life we have many beautiful practices—pilgrimages, acts of charity, volunteering for things, devotions like the Rosary. All of these enrich our faith, but they're not as foundational as the sacraments, including Confession. You may have come across Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the pyramid with things like food and shelter at the bottom and less necessary things at the top. In a spiritual hierarchy of needs, Confession would be near the bottom, because when we regularly receive God's mercy and healing, the other parts of the Christian life, like loving others and serving generously, become easier.

So Confession isn't just for those religious fanatics who feel they should go all the time. It's not just for big sinners like murderers or adulterers. It is for every one of us who wants to grow and to be truly alive, to live up to our potential.

You might be thinking that this sounds more like a homily for Lent, not Advent. But listen again to today's Gospel:

"Stay awake, be ready... you do not know when the Lord will come."

One day the Lord will come, or we'll leave this world and go to him, and he'll ask an account of our lives—how we used the gifts and opportunities he entrusted to us. Regular Confession is one of the best ways to prepare for that moment. It is not a burden. It won't cost us anything. The priest isn't sitting there going "tut

tut.” It keeps us spiritually awake, spiritually ready, and constantly supplied with the grace we need to live better and happier lives.