

Homily 2nd Sunday in Advent, 2024

Squinty is a word used almost only in Scotland. It's an onomatopoeia, the sound suggesting its meaning (an example of an onomatopoeia is, 'the buzzing of innumerable bees'): lop sided or not quite straight or right. A picture on the wall may be described as 'squinty' or as a noun a turn in the eye may be described as a 'squint'. The opposite straight is often used to describe someone who should 'straighten out their life' or get back 'on the straight and narrow', meaning to get back to a more dignified and becoming way of life.

John the Baptist in today's Gospel tells us to, Prepare the way of the Lord. Make STRAIGHT his path...' In other words, John is urging us to straighten out those parts of our squinty lives and get back on the right track, the path of unity with God and one another, the path of holiness or even wholeness. One positive step on that road, in preparation for the Coming of the Saviour at Christmas, might be celebrating The Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Sacraments are, by their very nature, encounters with Christ. The Christ of The Gospel is warm, compassionate, loving, full of mercy and forgiveness, empowering people and bringing them back into communion with God and with one another: It's the Jesus who tells the story of the prodigal son, a lad who could not go any lower, yet Our Lord makes him, together with his father, the hero of the parable. The boy's unlikely homecoming is celebrated with a ring on his finger, sandals on his feet and celebratory festivities: It's the Jesus who seeing the woman caught in the act of adultery being judged and condemned to death by stoning who counsels the mob, 'Whoever hasn't sinned cast the first stone!' and adds, 'Go in peace and sin no more, these have not condemned you and neither do I.' : It's the Jesus who calls the cheating and hated tax-collector, Zaccheus, down from the sycamore tree to dine with him, much to the anger and annoyance of the Jewish religious leaders: It's the Jesus who chooses and calls Mary Magdalen, Matthew, Simon the Zealot to be members of his 'inner circle' of disciples, each considered an outcast and sinner by mainstream Jewish society. Yes, Jesus always loves the sinner and tells us so, 'I tell you, solemnly, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance.' (Luke 15:7).

I once had the very opposite experience of 'Confession' in St Paul's Basilica, outside the Walls, Rome. I had no sooner entered the confessional when the young priest began berating me because it had been a year since I had been to The Sacrament. It had been difficult enough to muster the courage to face up to my sins, I didn't need the priest to 'rub salt into the wounds'. I walked out of the confessional without confessing my sins, hurt and damaged by the experience. I know that I am not alone in such or similar experiences, even although I must add that there are many priests who follow Christ's loving and compassionate example in the confessional.

When we celebrate The Sacrament of Reconciliation it is indeed incumbent upon the priest to emulate Christ of The Gospel. The priest must ensure that the penitent leaves the confessional overjoyed that Christ has paid for his/her sins on the Cross, full of gratitude that Jesus has loved him/her unconditionally and, through our Saviour in the Sacrament, the penitent should feel heavy weights removed from

his/her shoulders. Immense joy, deep gratitude and serene inner peace, as well as a firm determination to love better on the part of the penitent, are the outcomes demanded of the celebration of The Sacrament of Reconciliation.

The Prophet Baruch, in today's First Reading, emphasises that God's forgiveness will be a time of splendour and joy for Israel, 'For God will lead Israel with joy in the light of his glory, with the mercy and righteousness* that comes from him.' It is exactly this joy, light, mercy and righteousness which we should experience in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Anything less is to deny the compassionate and merciful Christ and the JOY of The Gospel.

I'm going to try, in preparation for the arrival of our Divine Saviour at Christmas, to sort out the squinty in my own life and straighten the lop-sided and things that are quite not right. However, in doing so I'm going to take a very wise priest's advice and, 'Choose my priest very carefully!' I strongly suggest, you do the same in order that 'Confession', is a true 'sign' of the deep healing of Jesus.

Having straightened out the 'squinty in our lives, the song of the angels will have added meaning, 'I bring you tidings of GREAT JOY, today a SAVIOUR has been born to us and he is Christ the Lord.'

* Biblical Righteousness, means being holy by living in right relationship with God, other people, and all creation. It means to live justly, honestly, and faithfully according to God's intention.