

Fifth Sunday of Lent - C Cycle
March 21, 2010

INTRODUCTION - Isaiah 43, 6-21; Philippians 3, 8-14; John 8, 1-11 God's people were a captive people, enslaved by the Babylonians 600 years before Christ. After 50 years of captivity, God sent them a prophet to announce to them that they were about to be set free. We hear that prophet in today's first reading. God tells them their release from the Babylonians would be no less spectacular than their release from slavery in Egypt centuries earlier. Even as the prophet speaks, he tells them the road back to their own land is being made ready. God's statement, "see, I am doing something new" leads us into the gospel. There we hear about a woman caught in adultery who was about to be sentenced to death. Jesus is doing something new: offering forgiveness rather than condemnation.

HOMILY - One afternoon the parish priest was getting ready to hear confessions. As he entered the confessional room, which had a divider in it, he found a man already in the room waiting for him. The man told the parish priest, "It's been 45 years since I've been to confession. I am impressed how things have changed. The room is well lit, it's a nice easy chair to sit in, a bottle of scotch, some nice cigars. It wasn't that way the last time I went." The parish priest said, "yes, it is rather comfortable, but where you are sitting is my side of the confessional room." By the way, if anyone wants to check out our confessional, they are welcome to. It's pretty simple.

I thought I might say something about confession today. The sacrament referred to as "confession" is also called the sacrament of penance or reconciliation. I thought the topic might be appropriate because of today's gospel where Jesus, as he had done many times in the gospels, demonstrates God's merciful love.

He did not come to condemn but to save. In the old days, which many of us remember, the priest often thought his job was to scold the penitent. Many people never came back because of that. I always tell our people in the RCIA, if a priest starts to bawl you out, get up and leave. Go to someone else who sees their role as that of Christ who offers freedom from guilt and shame and a sense of God's peace. Fortunately, I was blest with that kind of a confessor almost all my life. I've always felt that scolding doesn't help them to grow spiritually, but offering a person the chance to start over and the opportunity to know God's love does help a person to grow. Imagine how this woman in the gospel was changed by her encounter with Christ.

Jesus came not to condemn but to save. And that's the purpose of confession or reconciliation. Sometimes the priest tries to guide a person to see how wrong their behavior might be, but that guidance should be done in a gentle and loving way. The only time I know that Jesus was ever harsh with anyone was with the religious leaders who thought they were perfect and refused to see their faults. We're all sinners. We are all in need of God's mercy and love. That's why Christ came to us. You'll notice when the chips were down and Jesus started writing on the ground, no one threw any stones. They knew he had called their bluff. Some people have speculated that Jesus was writing people's sins, but no one knows for sure. Anyway, we're all in the same boat

with the crowd in the gospel, we would all have to walk away if Jesus said, "let the one among you who is without sin cast the first stone at her." Jesus does not whitewash sin or ignore the seriousness of it. More than anyone he knows how it hurts us and hurts our relationship with God. Notice he told the woman, "go and from now on, do not sin any more." The old catechism called this "a firm purpose of amendment."

In the first five or six centuries of the Church, people were allowed to receive confession only once in their lifetime. It was only for publicly committed serious sins. The attitude of Church leaders was that if a person sinned again, there was no hope for them. In addition, people had to go through a period of public penance before reconciliation. In around the sixth or seventh century, mostly due to the influence of the monasteries, a practice developed where the sacrament began to be used as spiritual direction. People went, even though they had no grave sins, and they went more frequently. It is the practice we have today, although many more people took advantage of the sacrament two or three generations ago than they do now. I think a person should go at least once or twice a year just to help themselves grow spiritually.

The sacrament of reconciliation is one of the most rewarding parts of being a priest, especially when I know I have helped lift a burden of guilt and self-hatred off a person's conscience. I am blest to be able to participate in the process of bringing God's love and peace to someone. I might mention that we have our penance service this Wednesday. There is an insert in today's bulletin describing how to make a good confession. Amen.