

Christ our Light



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Waiting in Darkness

Christ be our Light has been chosen as our Jubilee Hymn. I am glad to hear it being sung do enthusiastically in different parishes around the diocese. It is a song of prayer and praise to Jesus Christ, 'the true light that enlightens everyone' (Jn 1:9). In this Jubilee Year we celebrate the 2000th anniversary of the coming of the true light.

In the first verse we describe ourselves as longing for light and waiting in darkness. The words echo the prophecy of Isaiah read at the midnight Mass of Christmas: "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; on those who live in a land of deep shadow a light has shone" (Is 9:1). They also recall Zachary's prophecy of the imminent coming of Christ: "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Lk 1: 78, 79). The birth of Jesus was marked by light shining in the darkness. The glory of the Lord shone around the shepherds on Christmas night (Lk: 2:9); the wise men travelled to greet the new-born King, guided by the light of a star (Mt 2:2).

In the middle of a modern town or city we do not see the star as clearly as the magi or the shepherds did at the first Christmas. The glow of artificial light, which in so many ways is a great blessing, makes it difficult to get a good view of the night sky.

Our lives are surrounded by many kinds of light. Some, like the love of one's family or the gift of good health are great blessings in themselves. Others, like wealth and popularity and influence, are more ambiguous. They can provide opportunities to do great good, but they can also be misused. It is important, as we experience these many lights, that we do not lose sight of the light of Christ which gives all of them their most profound meaning.

All of these other lights, which bring joy and warmth to our lives, are fragile and impermanent. Death and illness, partings and disagreements can disrupt relationships. Betrayals, disappointments and misfortunes of all kinds can dash expectations and turn the most promising plans to dust. When we look at the wider world we see problems of violence and hunger and underdevelopment that seem too vast to solve. We see lives in which precious little light ever seems to shine.

The explosion of communications technology has brought us face to face with how unimaginably great are the inequalities in our world. The New Testament images of Lazarus begging for scraps at the rich man's gate (Lk 16:21) or the pagan woman's image of the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table (Mt 15:27) strike home uncomfortable when pictures of famine and disaster appear on our television screens. "Longing for food, many are hungry" our hymn reminds us, "longing for water, many still thirst".

In spite of the pressures of living in the bustling world of the twenty-first century, we cannot escape the realisation that hundreds of millions of human beings live in conditions that we would find unbearable. Reflecting on the growing contrast between want and plenty in the world, Pope John Paul says:

"...moral uneasiness is destined to become even more acute. It is obvious that a fundamental defect, or rather a series of defects, indeed a defective machinery is at the root of contemporary economics and materialistic civilization, which does not allow the human family to break free from such radically unjust situations"¹.

Any contribution that we can make is tiny in comparison with the size of the problem. The New Testament tells us that this is no excuse. The generosity of the young boy who had only five barley loaves and two fish helped to feed the multitude (Jn 6:9). Jesus said of the poor widow who put in only two coins, "I tell you truly this poor widow has put in more than any of them" (Lk 21:2).

¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Dives in Misericordia*, (On the Mercy of God), 11.

Jesus tells us that we will be judged by the way we treat the least of his brothers and sisters. When we see the pain that exists in the world, and in our own country, it is hard to dismiss the image of the Lord saying on behalf of the poor and the suffering: “I was hungry and you never gave me food. I was thirsty and you never gave me anything to drink. I was a stranger and you never made me welcome, lacking clothes and you never clothed me, sick and in prison and you never visited me” (Mt 25:42).

Sin – Personal and Social

When Pope John Paul speaks of the ‘defective machinery’ at the root of the world’s injustices, he is not thinking simply of impersonal structures. We cannot look on the pain of Christ’s sisters and brothers without asking about our own responsibility for the world in which we live. As sinful situations grow and develop, they can reach vast proportions and grow somehow anonymous. It can be hard to identify their causes and tempting to believe that they are nobody’s responsibility. But the Holy Father is in no doubt about the origin of these instances of what he calls ‘social sin’:

“[They] are the result of the accumulation and concentration of many personal sins. It is a case of the very personal sins of those who cause or support evil or who exploit it; of those who are in a position to avoid, eliminate or at least limit certain social evils but who fail to do so out of laziness, fear or the conspiracy of silence, through secret complicity or indifference; of those who take refuge in the supposed impossibility of changing the world and also of those who sidestep the effort and sacrifice required, producing specious reasons of higher order. The real responsibility, then, lies with individuals”².

None of us can claim to be totally free of responsibility that comes from complicity, or failure to act, or believing that it is useless because nothing can be changed. Every time we are unjust or dishonest or lacking in integrity or prejudiced or apathetic or ungrateful, we permit and foster sinful structures. On however small a scale we make our contribution to the accumulation and concentration of sin in the world. There would be something hypocritical about deploring the evils of the world without hearing Christ’s words, “Let the one among you who is guiltless be the first to throw a stone” (Jn 8:7). Our sins are not just private failures. Our individual sinfulness is linked in all sorts of ways with the darkness of the world’s sinfulness.

Our Jubilee hymn asks Christ to shine through the darkness. He is the light which scatters the darkness of our sins and of all the evil in the world. He was given the name *Jesus* because he was to free his people from their sins (Mt 2:21).

The Sacrament of Penance, or Reconciliation invites us to approach Jesus, the light of the world, so that he may scatter the darkness of our lives. The Jubilee Year is a very appropriate time to deepen, or if necessary to rediscover, this sacrament through which the Father of Mercies grants us pardon and peace.

Confessing the Mercy of God

We often call the sacrament ‘confession’. The word has two related meanings. The first, which we often neglect, is one that was found in older translations of the Bible: “Everyone that shall confess me before men, I will also confess him before my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 10:32). A modern translation says, “Everyone who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven”. The word ‘confess’ means to acknowledge and praise somebody.

² JOHN PAUL II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, (On Reconciliation and Penance), 16.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is confession in that sense. Indeed, like every liturgical action, it is *above all else* the praise of God, “the worship of the divine majesty”³. It is an act in which, like the Prodigal Son, we return to our Father whose forgiveness always exceeds our expectations. It is a turning around of our attitudes and behaviour. More importantly, it is a change in ourselves which is an acknowledgement of our Father and, at the same time, an expression of sorrowful love: “I have sinned against heaven and before you” (Lk 15:21).

The sincerity of that contrite acknowledgement of the Father is at the heart of repentance. Even in purely human relationships, the key element in any apology is an acknowledgement of the dignity and worth of the person we have offended and regret at having failed to respect their dignity. The difference, however, is that in approaching another human being, there can be a real fear that forgiveness might be refused.

In approaching God who sent his Son to be the light which enlightens everyone, there is no such doubt. We are coming to the light which overcomes not just our personal sins but all the evil in the world – the light which banishes the darkness before which we can feel so helpless.

In our preparation for confession, we should never lose sight of the fact that what we are doing is first and foremost an acknowledgement of the unlimited mercy of God. We are praising the light which scatters the darkness of our lives and of the world. The *principal* focus should not be on ourselves and on our sins, but on the light which overcomes our sins and leads us home to God.

The Confession of Sins

The other, more familiar, meaning of the word ‘confess’ is that we acknowledge our own sinfulness, the ways in which our sin has obscured the light. In order to do that, it is necessary to try to describe the darkness we have brought into the lives of other people and into our own. We need to try to put into words that ways in which we have failed to long for, to welcome and to move towards the truth, the peace, the hope, the light which are God’s gifts.

Confession in that sense can sometimes be very difficult. But there is no healing without honesty. An approach to someone we have hurt, which would show no awareness of how we have been in the wrong, is unlikely to be convincing, or to be accepted. In fact, it would be unsatisfying, even to the person making the apology.

We need to be honest not because God’s forgiveness is reluctant but in order that our repentance be full and honest. We know from our own experience that a necessary step in facing up to our failings is to be candid about them. The Twelve Steps Programmed of Alcoholics Anonymous, and similar bodies, asks those who are addicted to admit “to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs”.

An apology may, initially, be somewhat half-hearted: “If by any chance I may have been in the wrong, I am sorry”. If one is forgiven generously and without reservation, that reluctant apology is transformed into something wholehearted and full: “I’m so grateful to you for receiving me so well; what I did was terrible.”

People sometimes argue that it is enough to confess to God. In one sense that is true. God’s forgiveness is always generously offered. To say, “It is enough to confess to God” means, however, that one has not fully grasped the wonder of what we celebrate in the Jubilee Year. The infinite God has come to meet us in the human nature of his only Son – in a human life and death, in human words and actions. God meets us in visible, physical flesh and blood.

³ VATICAN II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy), 33.

God continues to meet us in the concrete reality of sacramental signs – bread and wine, water and oil, the promise of faithful love, the dialogue of apology and pardon that goes to make up the human reality of forgiveness.

The power of God's merciful love which will overcome evil and renew the whole of creation is beyond our capacity to see: "No human being can see me and survive", God told Moses (Ex 33:20). To be able to meet and be touched by that healing love in the context of human words and signs, far from being an imposition is a great gift of God.

We ask that the light of Christ may shine in our hearts. Forgiveness is always a very personal thing. "[Christ] personally addresses every sinner"⁴. That is why it is right that the sinner should personally address Christ through an honest confession of sins. During our *ad limina* visit last summer the Holy Father said to the Irish Bishops, "The personal nature of sin, conversion, forgiveness and reconciliation is the reason why the personal confession of sins and individual absolution are required". God's forgiveness is like that of the father of the Prodigal Son – a warm, healing and unexpectedly generous personal welcome.

Because our sinfulness is part of the wider sinfulness of the world, because it injures others, because it can hide the light of Christ whose Body we are, the idea that 'it is enough to confess to God' fails to take account of the full implications of our sins as harming not just ourselves but others. It also reflects a failure to understand that the light of God's mercy is not just a private word of forgiveness but is leading us to the new creation where we will share with people of every race, language and way of life.

For those who have freely and consciously committed grave sin, and honest acknowledgement to God and to the confessor will mean openly and honestly indicating the nature and frequency of such sins. In our relations with other people we could hardly hope to be forgiven a really serious injustice without admitting our guilt. Similarly, in the human words of the sacrament of Penance we cannot expect to receive forgiveness without admitting to actions which have broken our relationship with God and with the Body of Christ, the Church.

That is why, apart from the most exceptional cases, which are very unlikely to arise in Ireland, this honest confession of any grave sins one has committed is always required for the reception of the sacrament of Reconciliation. If and when the exceptional circumstances have passed, that honest admission should be made as soon as possible when the opportunity arises. This is not because there is something incomplete about the forgiveness of God but because there is something incomplete about the process of our own healing until we have expressed our guilt honestly and fully.

Confession of sins is not meant to be an unbearable ordeal. It is a coming to the light. The confession should not be made in a hopeless or disheartened frame of mind as if the darkness were overpowering and unconquerable. In confession we describe as best we can the darkness that Christ our light is defeating – has already defeated more completely than we can grasp.

Venial sins do not destroy our relationship with God. They are 'venial', (literally 'forgivable') either because the action or omission is less serious or because the sinner was not fully aware or fully free. As in relationships between people, less serious failures, which do not break a relationship, can be overcome without requiring a formal apology, through acts of kindness and appreciation that are part of the continuing relationship. This is not to say that an apology may not be appreciated and helpful.

Completeness and detail in the description of the nature and frequency of venial sins is not required as in the case of mortal sin which 'kills' or destroys our relationship with God. Those who are not conscious of grave sin after a good examination of their consciences, therefore, should not become

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1484.

anxious about achieving what is probably an impossible goal – an absolutely complete list of all their faults. They should confess matters that seem to them to be obstacles to their fuller following of Christ and try to make some realistic resolution to counteract these failings.

Frequent reception of the sacrament of Penance for those who are aware only of venial sins is a valuable way of growing closer to Christ:

“By its genuine self-knowledge is increased, Christian humility grows, bad habits are corrected, spiritual neglect and tepidity are resisted, the conscience is purified, the will strengthened, a salutary self-control is attained, and grace is increased in virtue of the Sacrament itself”⁵.

Generations of Christ’s followers have found it helpful to bring their daily failings, and the roots of those failings – in selfishness or pride or laziness or greed – to the light of Christ in the sacrament of Penance.

Venial sins show that we have allowed created things, the gifts of God’s creation, to shine so brightly that they begin to obscure the true light and impede our growth as human beings and as Christians.

A Continuing Journey into the Light

The forgiveness of God does not remove the weakness and the distorted priorities that lie at the root of our sins. These attachments and distortions will have to be overcome either in this life or in the next. Faced with the overwhelming light of God’s glory it will be all too how absurd was the disproportionate importance we attached to these limited and passing lights. The painful process of being separated from these attachments, which had become so much part of us, is the state of purification which we call Purgatory.

In apologising and seeking forgiveness from someone, we acknowledge their dignity and our sorrow at having failed to recognise it. We also acknowledge the ways in which we have offended them. The third step is to show our willingness to do better in the future. The offence has revealed a weakness or a disordered quality in ourselves; we will need to work at ensuring that it will not produce a similar insult or injury in the future. This may be expressed through promises or gifts or by being seen to make a special effort.

The ‘penance’ given by the confessor is an expression of our awareness that the forgiveness we have received is not so much an end as a new beginning. We still have to work at recovering spiritual health, at coming more fully to the light. The penance is “a help to renewal of life”⁶.

Forgiveness can only be received as a gift; it can never be demanded as a right. In particular it would be nonsensical to think that a creature could demand the forgiveness of the infinite Creator. We cannot forgive ourselves. Neither can we free ourselves from our weaknesses and failures. Only God can forgive sins⁷:

“No one is freed from sin by himself and by his own power, no one is raised above himself, no one is completely rid of his sickness or his solitude or his servitude. On the contrary, all stand in need of Christ, their model, their mentor, their liberator, their Saviour, their source of life”⁸.

At the same time, anyone who has been forgiven recognises the need to show appreciation of the pardon received and to try to ensure that the fault does not recur. The penance expresses that appreciation and is a beginning of that effort. It acknowledges that the change which is needed in

⁵ PIUS XII, *Mystici Corporis*, (On the Mystical Body of Christ), 88.

⁶ *The Rite of Penance*, 6c, cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, [CCC], 1459.

⁷ Cf. CCC, 1441.

⁸ VATICAN II, *Ad Gentes*, (Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity), 8

ourselves is part of the process by which God forgives us. The change is ultimately brought about not by our effort but by the light which makes us God's holy people.

Praising God Together

There is a particular value in celebrating the sacrament of Penance according to the Second Rite – namely, communal celebration with individual confession and absolution.

It is no accident that people still receive the sacrament in large numbers in places of pilgrimage such as Knock. That is at least partly because these places provide the atmosphere of praise of God, of realisation that we grow more fully into Christ by turning to God and being forgiven. Life is a pilgrimage in which we travel towards the light which gathers us as God's holy people. In such a setting we more easily see that the sacrament is above all else the worship of the divine majesty. There we more easily recognise the light which heals and attracts God's people on their pilgrim road.

In Rite Two of the sacrament of Penance we listen together to the Word of God and the homily; we recognise our common need of the light of God's mercy; we ask the Lord, as our Jubilee Hymn puts it, that his light should "shine in your Church gathered today". This provides an atmosphere of praise of God and of recognition of our shared need and shared trust.

There are other important values in celebrating according to Rite Two. One of the difficulties that people sometimes experience in approaching the sacrament is a certain unease about how to express their sins. Sometimes people have been using the same form of words for years. They sense that there are other, perhaps more important, issues that they would like to express, but do not know how to do so. The examination of conscience which is carried out in such services can be a most useful occasion for helping people to identify and express their sinfulness in a more adequate way.

We are meant to be "servants to one another", and "light for the world to see". In the communal celebration of the sacrament, we more easily realise that we are a community trying to follow Christ together. We can grasp that, through our sins, we weaken our participation in the community of the Church and diminish the effectiveness of our witness to the light. At the same time we draw strength from one another as we admit that we are all sinners and give thanks for the mercy that sets us free.

The season of Lent in this Jubilee Year, and especially the period leading up to Easter should be marked by communal services of Penance in every part of the diocese. I know that priests in recent years have been very generous with their time in helping neighbouring parishes to celebrate these services well. I hope that there will be a special effort this Lent to ensure, through the celebration of Penance according to Rite Two, that Christ may be the light shining in darkness for as many people as possible. I hope that pastoral suggestions for this will be provided shortly.

We ask Christ that his light may shine in the Church. Forgiveness of sins, 'through the ministry of the Church' restores or repairs our relationship with God. It also restores or repairs our relationship with the Church which we have injured by our sins. Its mission and witness have been weakened. The sign which we are meant to be in the world has been obscured.

The Word of Forgiveness

God's forgiveness is expressed in the sacrament through the words of absolution. These are sacramental words, bringing about what they signify. They are words filled with the healing power of God the Father of Mercies who has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins.

Through the words of absolution, we are touched by the creative word of God, who, at the dawn of creation “said ‘let there be light’ and there was light” (Gen 1:3). The words of absolution are spoken in the power of the Holy Spirit who renews the face of the earth and who has been sent among us for the forgiveness of sins. Through these words, the light for which we pray in our Jubilee Hymn shines in our hearts, in the Church and in the whole of creation, which is waiting for the coming of the light of Christ.

Just as our sins are interrelated with the sinful structures that darken the world, so the word of absolution that forgives our sins, is the word of the same Father who sits on the throne and says, “I am making all things new” (Rev 21:5). It is a word which addresses not only our inability to heal *ourselves* but also our helplessness in the face of the injustice and suffering of our own time and of all the generations, past and future.

A renewed appreciation of the sacrament of Reconciliation would bring us to the heart of what the Jubilee celebrates:

The merciful Father takes no account of the sins for which we are truly sorry (cf Is 38:17). He is now doing something new and in the love which forgives he anticipates the new heavens and the new earth⁹.

May Christ be our light as we journey towards the new heavens and the new earth. “I am the light of the world”, he said, “anyone who believes in me will not be walking in darkness but will have the light of life” (Jn 8:12).

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⁹ JOHN PAUL II, *Incarnationis Mysterium* (Bull Proclaiming the Jubilee Year), 11.