



Allocutio



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Allocutio: Sin

In last Sunday's Gospel Jesus linked the forgiveness of sin with a physical healing. By forgiving his sin he seemed to cause the physical paralysis to disappear. And in our minds we ask: could this be true? St. Paul was later to say that through sin suffering and death came into the world. Is there really a link between the two? Surely microbes and bacteria that lay us low are not connected with sin!

It is important that we do not kill ourselves to find answers when we are far from knowing the full truth at many a level. But it is worth considering that in some cases there is a real link between the sins people commit and possible illnesses they may suffer. With the possible corollary too that by dealing with our sins properly we can undo bad physical side effects in us.

Have you ever noticed how an attack on the bodily integrity of someone or on their property does not just leave them physically wounded but wounded at a worse level. Wounded psychologically and emotionally and even spiritually! The man who is attacked in his work place sometimes cannot go back to work because his nerves are gone. And sometimes even news of an attack on one person can change a whole society. Elderly people afraid to go out at night or to open their doors. Or some women very wary of any man at all. So sin does have tentacles that do dig deep into the human psyche and can cause deep anxieties in us humans. In other words it can paralyse us. And it can come very close to home, even among those we live with and love to some extent. Because it can happen in families that someone is paralysed by some atmosphere at home that prevents them being able to say something as it is or to express their emotions in a healthy way. How many spouses have had their capacity to relate to the other frozen by even one act of violence or one cutting word? So it is probably true to say that all of us are in some way paralytics caused by the reality of sin around us.

The man who was let down through the roof however seems to have a slightly different condition because in his case, if we accept the words of Jesus, you cannot but pick up that it is not the sins of others against him but his own sins that have left him a paralytic. Might it be even true that this also is our story?

I sometimes have this recurring nightmare. I have buried a body or the evidence of some crime I have committed. And I live in dread of it being discovered. Now I assure you I am not guilty of such a crime. I once mentioned this recurring nightmare to a criminal psychologist and he suggested it may be partly because I've read too many Agatha Christies. It could be a throw back to some childish events when I did something wrong and tried to hide it from mammy or daddy. The fact is that our sins can disturb us and can cause us many a complex. And some worry or anxiety can so eat at us that it eventually impacts on, not just our soul, but spills over into our bodies. Deep worry can lead to many a physical condition: ulcers, asthma, cancers. Or it may cause a lack of sleep that impairs our functioning. And guilt has left many a person ending their days in psychiatric care. At the time it was committed the sin or crime seemed good but as years went by, and as they realised the impact of the sin, their capacity to live and cope crumbled. Depression and paralysis takes over. Some of this you see in your work!

Two weeks ago I was doing a course in Manresa and there was a member of the Church of Ireland on the course. She knew that we Catholics have the Sacrament of Reconciliation. And she commented that to her it seemed to be something very good. Because, as she said, "while we Protestants believe that we can say sorry to God in our hearts and believe he forgives us, we often wonder if our sorrow was sincere enough and whether God really forgave us."



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To that we Catholics could point out to her the greatness of this Sacrament. You leave the Confessional with a weight off your mind. By going to the priest who represents both God and the rest of the community and humbly admitting what you have done you are showing your genuineness. And by hearing Christ's words in the absolution, and by their effect, the sins of our past life are wiped out as if they never had been. We no longer carry the burden of guilt but begin a new life with nothing from the past holding us back. And I wonder how many people have been saved from the paralysis of their own sins by this sacrament? In fact in some instances it does a far better job than the psychotherapist's couch on which many people around the world try to deal with the burden of their guilt and often only with limited success.

It is fair to say that in the case of some sins the need for restitution is also necessary to help undo the past. There are in fact people paralysed by the thought of the hurt they did to others and they cannot now undo it. That is obviously the case after someone has left another dead. The pain of that even lives in the hearts of those who were not at fault. So how can we make up? Very often it is enough to go out from Confession with the firm intention of improving on our lives and resolving that from now on we are going to be more charitable and forgiving with those around us, that we are going to put in a better effort and not cheat on others. But sometimes we may have left someone or a group of people seriously at disadvantage. We should recall the parable of the Good Samaritan who went to assist the wounded. Christ does want us to assist those whom life leaves damaged. And what when I have someone damaged? Zacchaeus wanted to make up four-fold to anyone he had hurt. I think that as a society we have been weak on that point although now in view of recent happenings that aspect of things may be coming back into focus.

Finally I want you to notice one other thing. The wounds this man inflicted on himself by his own sin, his paralysis, caused him to be brought before the God who loved him, who forgave him and so restored his health. It is interesting that his story is not unlike that of the Prodigal son who was also led to a breakdown that led him back to the Father who restored him. These both illustrate the saying: O Felix Culpa! Our sins wound us more than anyone else. But this is the paradox: the hurt they cause us leads us back to the God who takes away both our sins and the wounds they cause us. And we do get an experience of that every time we go to Confession and leave our sins and guilt behind after we have been absolved.

Amen.

Fr Paul Churchill