

Fr. Albert Shamon



Word for Sunday

We All Have Another Chance

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Lk. 13:1-9. (R1) Ex. c:1-8, 13-15. (R2) 1 Cor. 10:1-6, 10-12.

I am sure we have all seen cartoons showing a prophet of gloom and doom walking down a busy main street of a big city. He walks sandwiched between two boards, front and back, that proclaim: "Repent! The end is near!" Just underneath his uplifted foot is an uncovered manhole in the sidewalk. It probably gave us a good laugh. After all, such

prophets are not to be taken seriously at all.

Well, the readings of next Sunday's liturgy sound very much like the woeful announcement on the sandwich board of our cartoon prophet.

Paul, for instance, recalls what happened to Israel in the desert and then goes on to say, "These things have been written as a warning to us. . . Let anyone who thinks he is standing upright, watch out lest he fall!"

Our Lord talks of two national disasters that happened to both Galileans and Judeans — one was an act of man (Pilate), the other an act of God (a falling tower). Jesus warns, "You will all come to the same end unless you reform."

In the parable that followed, Jesus again speaks of impending judgment. The fig tree is Israel. For three years Jesus had sought a response from Israel. He got none. Hardly a year is left. Israel has one more chance. The Son of God is to be taken seriously. If He is not, Israel shall be cut down like an unproductive fig tree.

What is the message for us? God's invitation to live the faith and produce good works is to be taken seriously. When we were marked with ashes on Ash Wednesday, the priest said, "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel."

St. Bernard, one of the greatest preachers of the Middle Ages, occasionally would try to arouse the attention of a drowsy, inattentive congregation in this way. He would stop suddenly in the middle of the sermon, reach into the folds of his robes, draw out a piece of paper, and say, "By the way, would you like to hear a letter I received this morning?"

Instantly, all eyes would be fixed on the piece of paper, everyone's attention aroused. Then Bernard would cry out, "Aha, is that it? You are eager to hear the contents of this letter. And yet the good news of God's word which I preach to you seems to mean very little to you!"

Our God has to be taken seriously. We must cease treating Him like a cartoon prophet. The calls He issues to each of us to repent and

be productive are meant to evoke a warm response from each of us. While His words are very threatening, there is

something very consoling in His parable. It says we do have at least one more chance — this Lent!

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Insights in Liturgy

By Father Robert J. Kennedy

General Absolution: Concerns

The celebration of the Rite of Reconciliation of Penitents with General Confession and Absolution raises many pastoral concerns. How often is it permissible? What about serious sins? Isn't it the easy way out?

This third form of the sacrament of Penance is seen to be exceptional, celebrated in "particular occasional circumstances" determined by the local bishop or, in cases of emergency, by the reconciling minister. This means first, that the Rite with General Confession and Absolution will not be celebrated regularly, but only in those times and situations when the number of available confessors is insufficient to celebrate an individual form of Penance adequately, resulting in the delay of sacramental reconciliation and the reception of Holy Communion. In addition, "penitents must resolve individually to confess their serious sins at least within a year, unless this is morally impossible."

These conditions raise further problems because they are sufficiently ambiguous to allow either a more liberal or a more conservative interpretation. What is the best way to deal with this?

First, this form of celebration of Penance must be seen in the fuller context of God's mercy and forgiveness, of conversion in the Christian life, and of the communal aspects of the sacrament. This calls for good, solid catechesis on the mystery of reconciliation, the meaning of sin and the rites themselves, and will eliminate the "slot machine" mentality about this form of the sacrament.

Second, the present diocesan guidelines on the Implementation of the Rite of Penance suggest several occasions of situations when priests may use General Confession and Absolution: "one-priest" areas, resort areas, or on special family, parish or community occasions. Also, the seasons of Advent and Lent are appropriate times for such celebrations since the number of penitents wishing to be reconciled usually increases and there is a greater demand on the priests' time. While every effort must be made to provide individual reconciliation, it may be appropriate to schedule the Rite of General Confession and Absolution in these penitential seasons.

Some might consider this the "easy way out." There is certainly no doubt that it is a difficult process to face up to our weaknesses, our failure, our sin. But the Rite of Reconciliation with General Confession and Absolution is no magic act which reconciles us in the wink of an eye. It presupposes a contrite spirit on the part of the penitent, a

humbled heart produced by honest personal efforts at bringing one's life back into line with the Gospel's call. This Rite — as with every form of the Sacrament of Penance — is the summit of our efforts to be reconciled with God and neighbor and it serves as the source of our ongoing conversion, expressed by a life more and more steeped in love of God.

This is why Advent and Lent are good times for this form of Penance: there has been a good amount of time spent in renewing our lives according to the Gospel message, and we can come with something to celebrate, we can worship the Lord for his steadfast mercy toward us.

Finally, the greatest pastoral concern of all is that the Church continue the ministry of reconciliation in the way Jesus did. We must preach the challenging Word of God in a way that the Christian People may see

clearly the direction of their own hearts, but we must also provide a welcome place for them to be unburdened. This will make the celebration of the sacrament, in whatever form, a joyous prayer of thanks for the mercy of God.

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