

Father O'Connor's Homily for 17 November 2024  
Thirty-third Ordinary Sunday – B

Daniel 12:1-3  
Hebrews 10: 11-14, 18  
Mark 13: 24-32

A cartoon shows a man dressed as a prophet and holding a sign which reads: “Resist temptation.” In the next frame is a rather scruffy-looking fellow who says to the prophet: “I’m not looking to resist temptation. I’m looking to find it!”

This cartoon tells us something about our human nature. We know that we need to resist temptation. But sometimes we resist God’s grace and actually do go looking for temptation. And then, after we have fallen for it and sinned, we feel guilty.

So what do we make of our guilt? That is the question that I would like to work with today.

The Letter to the Hebrews, our Second Reading, tells us that Jesus “offered one sacrifice for sins and took His seat forever at the right hand of God.”

Jesus’ one sacrifice on the Cross was sufficient for the forgiveness of the sins of the whole world, from the very beginning until the end of time [as the First Reading from the Prophet Daniel and the Gospel from Mark spoke about.]

There are people who suffer from overwhelming guilt. Edgar Allan Poe’s short story, “The Tell-Tale Heart” [published in 1843], centers upon a man with a guilty conscience. He had murdered an old man, described as having a “vulture eye.” He then hid his dead body under the floorboards. Ultimately his guilt manifested itself in his hallucination that the murdered man’s heart was still beating under the floorboards. The beating of that heart seemed to get louder and louder until finally the guilty man was driven to reveal his crime to the authorities. And justice was served.

There are some people who suffer from guilt in extreme ways and without any proportion. They suffer from a painful disorder called scrupulosity. And it is mentally, emotionally and spiritually painful. While venial sin is sin indeed, the scrupulous person tends to see every sin as a mortal sin, and all kinds of small circumstances as grave matter. They can

become obsessed with a kind of guilt that does not lead to an actual conversion of life or to a growth in virtue, but leads instead to an obsessive-compulsive high anxiety. My heart goes out to those afflicted with this painful disorder of scrupulosity.

In the case of people who are scrupulous, the driving force is often their constant fear of eternal damnation in hell. And this unrelenting fear of condemnation is fueled by the way they think of God. God is for them more a prosecuting attorney driven to ferret out their many offenses in precise detail, than God as a father welcoming his prodigal child back home with a loving embrace [Luke 15: 11-32, The Prodigal Son].

There are many things we would like to tell a scrupulous person – things about God and things about themselves. That God knows that we will never reach absolute perfection in this life. But that our most-merciful God still loves us for trying to do the best that we can. Most of all, perhaps, we would like to assure them that God does not have it in for them, and that they do not need to see the confessional as a place where another rescue from eternal damnation is granted to them... but only for a brief moment, that will not last very long.

Again, my heart goes out to those afflicted with this painful disorder of scrupulosity. Please know that God loves you.

For most of us, though, proportionate guilt – not extreme scrupulous guilt, not lax watered-down guilt – can be a very healthy tool. As someone put it: “Guilt is for the soul what pain is for the body.” When we have a physical pain it tells us that something is wrong and needs attention, so that we can feel better again.

Guilt can do that for our souls. It tells us that something is wrong and needs attention. It can lead us to God’s mercy and forgiveness, so that we can indeed feel better with a clear conscience.

A preacher was talking about the weight of sin. And someone in the congregation asked: “How much does sin weigh? Ten pounds?”

The preacher thought for a moment, and then replied: “If you put a two-hundred pound weight on a corpse, will that body feel anything?”

“Of course not,” the man answered, “because that body is dead.”

The preacher went on to say: “When our spirit is dead, we stop feeling the weight of our sin.”

That is an important observation because guilt, if properly felt, can lead us to God’s mercy and forgiveness. But sometimes people would rather live “dead in their sins” – and no longer feel the weight of their sins.

Where can we go with our sins? To Jesus Christ. As the Letter to the Hebrews tells us, Jesus “offered one sacrifice for sins, and took His seat forever at the right hand of God.” We can go to Him because He is the only one who can forgive our sins. And His cross shows us how far He will go for us.

A novelist writes about a man on his deathbed. He is very sorry for his sins and begs Jesus for His mercy. The man closes his eyes and dies.

He is then standing before Jesus for judgment, and looking rather disheveled. Jesus smiles at him and takes a wet sponge and begins wiping the smudges off this man’s face until he is clean.

And then Jesus says to him: “I know that your heart is truly sorry and so I have forgiven your sins. Welcome to heaven, my beloved. Now, go and play in my kingdom forever.”

Our guilt is a good thing if it leads us to Jesus who alone can forgive our sins.

He has given us the great Sacrament of His mercy – Confession, Penance, Reconciliation – in which He wipes away our sins and takes away our guilt. Jesus is always ready to forgive. He simply waits for us to ask Him.

As the Letter to the Hebrews tells us, Jesus “offered one sacrifice for sins, and took His seat forever at the right hand of God.”

Because of this, we can live in the confident hope that when our time for judgment comes, Jesus will say to us: “I know that your heart is truly sorry and so I have forgiven your sins. Welcome to heaven, my beloved. Now, go and play in my kingdom forever.”