GUILDFORD CATHEDRAL

LENT AND CONFESSION

A Lenten Reflection

The Very Reverend Bob Cooper
Dean of Guildford

"The door that looks like a cell is, on the other side, a garden."

I want to begin with a confession. Which is, as it happens, rather appropriate.

Some years ago, I found myself in a situation that called for a frank conversation with my spiritual director. I had been carrying something for longer than I care to admit, not something dramatic, not the kind of thing that would make the newspapers, simply a pattern of thought and behaviour that I knew was not good, and which I had been managing rather than facing. I had become, as the old phrase has it, an expert in the custody of my soul, by which I mean I had become very good at keeping certain doors firmly shut.

My spiritual director, with the particular gift that good spiritual directors have for bypassing one's carefully constructed defences, simply asked: "When did you last make your confession?"

I have never forgotten my reaction. It was not guilt. It was not defensiveness. It was, to my considerable surprise, relief. Someone had finally named the thing I had been circling for months. And the door I had been keeping shut suddenly looked less like a locked cell and more like an opening.

I suspect I am not alone in this. Confession, sacramental, formal, spoken confession, is one of those practices in Anglican life that people tend to feel strongly about, usually in one of two directions. There are those for whom it has been a profound and transforming gift, and who wonder why on earth the rest of us are not availing ourselves of it. And there are those for whom it sits in the same category as incense and bells: admirable in its way, but not quite for them, redolent of a tradition that feels somehow foreign.

This morning, I want to invite you to look again. Not to insist that there is only one way to practise repentance, but to suggest that what the Church of England has always taught about confession, quietly, carefully, in the grain of its liturgy and its pastoral practice, is something we might receive more fully in this season of Lent than perhaps we have before.

What Lent Is Actually For

It is worth beginning with a word about Lent itself, because it is a season that attracts misunderstanding almost as reliably as it attracts the question "what are you giving up?"

Lent is not, at its heart, about self-improvement. It is not a spiritual fitness programme, or a divine version of Dry January. The forty days do not exist to make us slightly better versions of ourselves by Easter. They exist, rather, to lead us somewhere: to the cross, and through the cross to resurrection.

The church's ancient tradition of Lent was rooted in the preparation of catechumens for baptism at Easter; a serious, intensive process of examination, instruction and conversion. Those already baptised kept Lent alongside them, in solidarity and in renewal of their own baptismal promises. The question at the heart of Lent was not "how can I improve?" but rather, "who am I before God, truly? And who am I called to become?"

There is also something important about what Lent does to our sense of time. We live at a pace that actively discourages self-examination. The diary fills, the inbox refills as fast as we empty it, and the interior life, that country which requires a certain stillness to enter, gets progressively harder to reach. Lent is the church's counter-cultural insistence that we stop. That we attend. That we accept the invitation to go somewhere we might not have chosen to go on our own. The forty days mirror Christ's forty days in the wilderness, and the wilderness, for all its discomfort, was not a place of punishment but of preparation. It was where Jesus faced himself and his calling, with honesty, before his ministry began.

This is why confession belongs to Lent so naturally. Not because Lent is a season of misery or self-flagellation, it is not, but because any honest journey towards resurrection must pass through honesty about where we actually are. Easter does not arrive through the avoidance of Good Friday. And we cannot receive the gift of forgiveness unless we are willing, first, to acknowledge that there is something to forgive.

The Prodigal and the Father

The parable we call the Prodigal Son (which would be better named the parable of the Waiting Father, or perhaps the parable of the Two Lost Sons) is one of the great Lenten texts, and also one of the great texts on confession.

Notice how Luke tells it. The younger son, in the far country, "came to himself." Before anything else happens, before the journey home, before the rehearsed speech, before the father sees him from a distance and runs there, is this interior moment of clarity. He came to himself. He saw his situation plainly. He named it without euphemism: I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.

This is the movement of repentance. Not self-loathing, the son does not wallow, does not seem to have spent weeks on the floor of the pigsty in an agony of guilt. He simply sees. He acknowledges. And then he moves.

What he does not expect is the father's response. He has a speech prepared, a careful, modest proposal about becoming a hired servant. He never gets to deliver it. The father has seen him from a long way off. The father runs. There is no record of any other occasion in the ancient world on which a wealthy patriarch ran anywhere; it was beneath dignity. The father runs, falls on his neck, and kisses him before a word has been spoken.

The robe. The ring. The sandals. The fatted calf. This is not the response of a God grudgingly issuing a pardon to someone who has completed the necessary procedural steps. This is a God who has been

watching the road. This is a God who weeps for us before we have even finished making our apologies.

I find it significant that the son does eventually speak his confession "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son", and that the father does not interrupt him to say there is no need, it does not matter, forget about it. The words are spoken. They are heard. And they are received into an embrace.

It is also worth pausing on the elder son, who is often the character we overlook. He, too, is lost; lost in resentment, lost in a version of goodness that has curdled into self-righteousness, lost in the mistaken belief that the father's love is a finite resource that the younger brother has now partially consumed. His lostness is less obvious, and perhaps more dangerous for that. The confession he needs to make is of a different kind: not I have wasted my life but I have resented yours. The father goes out to him too, with the same extraordinary tenderness. But the parable ends before we know whether he comes in. That ending, I think, is deliberate. It is addressed to us.

What the Church of England Actually Teaches

Here is something that surprises many Anglicans: our tradition has never abolished sacramental confession. It has never taught that private, spoken confession to a priest is something Catholics do and we do not. What the Reformation reformed was not the practice itself but the insistence upon it as a mandatory requirement for all Christians before they could receive communion.

The formula bequeathed to us by the architects of the English Reformation, found still in our rites of ministry to the sick, and embedded in our pastoral practice, is this: All may; none must; some should.

All may. The door is not closed. Sacramental confession, the formal spoken acknowledgement of specific sins before a priest who pronounces absolution, is fully available within Anglican practice, and has been throughout our history. There are priests equipped for it, and the cathedral is among the places where it is offered.

None must. We are not Roman Catholic. The compulsion that the reformers rightly resisted, the requirement to rehearse every sin to a priest before each communion, is not part of our tradition. The general confession of the liturgy, made with sincerity and faith, is a real and sufficient means of receiving God's forgiveness for the great majority of circumstances.

Some should. This is the phrase that tends to get lost. It is a pastoral judgement that was made by the reformers themselves, retained through the centuries: that there are seasons, circumstances, and kinds of burden for which the particular ministry of absolution, spoken face to face and person to person, is especially suited. Not because God's forgiveness is otherwise unavailable, but because we are embodied creatures, and there is something that happens when we speak aloud what we have previously only thought, when another human being looks us in the eye and says I absolve you, something that the silent transaction within our own heads does not always accomplish.

This is not magic. It is not that the priest has a special power unavailable elsewhere. It is that the Church acts as the Body of Christ: the priest, in pronouncing absolution, is not offering their own forgiveness but declaring God's, in a form that the repentant sinner can hear, receive, and rest upon.

The Anatomy of Confession

For those who have never made a formal confession, or who made one long ago and have forgotten the shape of it, it may be helpful to say simply what it involves. There is nothing arcane about it.

At its simplest: you come before a priest. You acknowledge that you are making a confession. You speak as honestly as you are able the things that lie between you and God: not necessarily a comprehensive inventory of every failure since birth, but the specific things that have troubled your conscience, that you have been carrying, that you know to be wrong. The priest may offer a word of counsel or simply listen. Then they pronounce the absolution — the declaration, in God's name, that you are forgiven. Sometimes a short act of thanksgiving or penance follows.

What makes it valuable is not its complexity but its specificity. There is a significant difference between I have sinned and fallen short of your glory which is true, and important to say, and I said this thing that wounded that person, and I have not made it right, and I am ashamed of it. The general acknowledgement is a foundation; the particular acknowledgement is, often, the thing that sets us free. The thing we name loses some of its power over us.

Centuries of pastoral experience, and a good deal of modern psychology, tend to agree on this point. What we bring into the light becomes manageable. What we keep in the dark tends to grow.

It is also worth saying that the seal of confession, the absolute confidentiality of what is disclosed, is not a technicality. It is a theological statement. What is said in confession goes nowhere: not to the bishop, not to the person who has been wronged, not even to the priest in a subsequent ordinary conversation. The confessor is, in that moment, functioning not as an individual with their own reactions and responsibilities, but as a vessel of the mercy of God. That confidentiality is why people have been able to bring, across the centuries, the things they could bring nowhere else. It is, in that sense, one of the safest places in the world. I can honestly say that in the 1000s of confessions I have heard over many decades, I cannot remember one thing that people have shared with me.

On Scrupulosity and the Tender Conscience

A word needs to be said about those who find themselves at the opposite end of this problem. If for some people confession is something they have always avoided, for others it has become, or threatens to become, a burden rather than a liberation; a cycle of anxiety in which the same sins are confessed repeatedly, the absolution never quite felt, the relief always temporary.

This, too, is a pastoral reality. The tradition has a name for it: scrupulosity; an excessive and disordered anxiety about sin that, in its extreme form, becomes a spiritual affliction in its own right. It is worth saying plainly: this is not what confession is for. Absolution, once given and received in faith, is given. The God of the Waiting Father does not revoke the robe and the ring.

If you find that your conscience is more instrument of torment than guide, that is worth bringing to a priest or spiritual director not for another confession but for a conversation. The mercy of God is not a dwindling resource. It does not run out.

Lent as Laboratory

There is a tradition in some corners of the church of using Lent as a time for what used to be called an examen, a regular, disciplined review of conscience. This is not the same as wallowing in guilt. The Daily Examen, as it comes down to us through Ignatian spirituality, is simply the practice of pausing each day to ask: where was God at work today? And where did I fall short of what I know to be good?

It is a practice of attention. And in Lent, the church gives us forty days to practise attention: to ourselves, to God, and to the gap between where we are and where we are called to be. Not in order to despair of that gap, but in order to receive, on Easter morning, the news that the gap has been crossed, from the other side.

One practical suggestion: if the idea of formal sacramental confession feels like a large step, begin with something smaller. Each evening this Lent, take five minutes. Light a candle if that helps. Ask God to show you the day as it actually was, not as you would prefer it to have been. Notice what rises. Notice the moments of grace you perhaps failed to acknowledge, and the moments of smallness or unkindness that you perhaps preferred not to dwell on. Speak them aloud, even if only to the room. Then receive, in whatever form speaks to you, the assurance that you are forgiven and held.

You may find that this daily practice, sustained across forty days, itself becomes a kind of preparation for the deeper honesty of a formal confession if you feel drawn to it, or simply for arriving at Easter as someone who has actually made a journey, rather than someone who has merely waited for it to be over.

Confession, in this light, is not a gloomy business. It is an act of hope. To confess is to believe that forgiveness is possible, that the past is not the final word, that we are not condemned to be only what we have been. To confess is to turn, which is what repentance means — metanoia, a change of mind and direction. It is to come to ourselves, like the son in the far country, and to begin the walk home.

Conclusion: The Door That Looks Like a Cell

I began with a confession. Let me end with an invitation.

This Lent, I invite you to be honest with yourself and to take that honesty somewhere. If you are someone for whom the general confession of our liturgy is a living and sufficient practice, then inhabit it more fully: slow down, mean the words, let them land. If you are someone who is carrying something specific, something that has been there for a while, something you suspect you have been managing rather than facing, consider whether this might be the season to bring it into the light.

The cathedral offers the ministry of confession. If you have never tried it, or not for a long time, I would encourage you not to let anxiety about the form stand in the way. There is no examination to pass. There is no performance to give. There is simply the mercy of God, mediated through the church, available to those willing to receive it.

The door that looks like a cell is, on the other side, a garden.

Come to yourself. Begin the walk home.

Amen.

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Dean of Guildford

Guildford Cathedral
Stag Hill, Guildford, Surrey GU2 7UP
www.guildford-cathedral.org