

Alice Grayson was to bake a cake for the Baptist Church ladies' group bake sale in Tuscaloosa, but she forgot to do it until the last minute. She remembered it the morning of the bake sale and after rummaging through her pantry she found an angel food cake mix and quickly made it while drying her hair and dressing and helping her son Bryan pack up for Scout Camp. But when Alice took the cake from the oven, the center had dropped flat and the cake was horribly disfigured.

She said, "Oh no, there's no time to bake another cake." This cake was really important to Alice because she so wanted to fit in at her new church, and in her new community of new friends. So, being inventive, she looked around the house for something to build up the center of the cake. Alice found it in the bathroom – a roll of toilet paper. She plunked it in and then covered it with icing. Not only did the finished product look beautiful, it looked perfect!

Before she left the house to drop the cake at the church and head for work, Alice woke her daughter Amanda and gave her some money and specific instructions to be at the bake sale the minute it opened at 9:30, and to buy that cake and bring it home. When the daughter arrived at the sale, she found that the beautiful perfect cake had already been sold. Amanda grabbed her cell phone and called her mom. Alice was horrified. She was beside herself. Everyone would find out; what would they think? This was a disaster! She would be ostracized, talked about, ridiculed.

All night Alice lay in bed thinking about people pointing their fingers at her and talking about her behind her back. The next day, Alice promised herself that she would try not to think about the cake and she would attend the fancy luncheon at the home of a friend of a friend – and try to have a good time. Alice did not really want to attend because the hostess was a snob who more than once had looked down her nose at the fact that Alice was a single parent and not from the founding families of Tuscaloosa, but having already RSVP'd she could not think of a believable excuse to stay home.

The meal was elegant, the company definitely upper crust Old South....and to Alice's horror, the CAKE in question was presented for dessert. Alice felt the blood drain from her body when she saw the cake. She started out of her chair to rush to tell her hostess all about it, but before she could get to her feet, the Mayor's wife said, "What a beautiful cake!" Alice, who was still stunned, sat back in her chair when she heard the hostess – who was a prominent member of her new church-- say, "Thank you – I baked it myself!" And Alice smiled and thought, "God is so good." (from an email of 8 Sept 2006)

Today's feast of Christ the King has been called the autumn version of Palm Sunday – a day when we sing "Hosanna to the Lord" whose message we tend to forget or forsake almost as soon as we leave the parade grounds. Our gospel is from John, where we see Jesus standing before Pilate, a man who lived in a world in which heredity, clothing, titles and the power to manipulate defined a person's worth. In all of these senses, our current world is not really any different.

In contrast, Jesus had no need to cling to status. He knew why He was born and sent into the world. He claims that His only purpose in life was to testify to the truth, and earlier in this Gospel Jesus had stated "I AM the Truth." Jesus is the freest man in history. How could we be any freer than that? To live by the truth. If being a king means that nothing and no one can constrain you, then Jesus is the King of Kings because He knows what He is about and no one can take that away.

Pilate had thought that he was dealing with a religious fanatic, or perhaps as others alleged, a revolutionary. But Pilate discovered that in Jesus he was facing the most powerful person he had ever met.

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Nothing Pilate could say or do, no bribe, no reward and no punishment could sway this man. Worse yet, Jesus obviously had the power to influence others to imitate and follow Him. And this is ultimately the point of this feast. Those who choose Christ as their king, buy into His preaching about the reign of God. Jesus defined His kingdom as one in which the greatest is the one who serves the most. In His realm, the strongest have no need of coercion because those who seek the truth about life will fall in love with Him and stake their lives on the freedom He alone can offer, being willing to forsake everything else for it. If we choose to belong to the kingdom of Christ the King, then we know that our primary identity comes from the God who loves us all. Our citizenship papers are the baptismal certificates that entrust us with the mission to live by and spread the values of God's reign. Because we see Christ as king of the universe, we assume care for all of creation – and all of God's creatures – because it is part of our mission, as Pope Francis keeps reminding us. (cf. EVANGELII GAUDIUM #24)

So then, my second of only 2 points. A word about truth. It seems we argue a lot about what is true these days. Both in our political life and in our church life. People read something on the internet and say 'this is true.' But it often is not. So how do we know what IS true and what is not? Well, in Catholic church world, the truth is often a lot bigger – and more complicated than a lot of people realize. And as I have said before, it is rarely THIS or THAT. It is usually a combination of BOTH.

Several years ago, following a talk I had given, I was asked a series of questions about morality, sin, confession, and forgiveness. I began my response with a few distinctions to show how complex these questions were and was moving on to the next step, an attempt to give some answers, when a man present lost his patience and his temper. He challenged me angrily, "Father, why are you fudging around? You know the answer, every Catholic does! Sex outside of marriage, missing mass on Sundays, these are mortal sins, and no theological or psychological distinctions can change that! You know too, that the Catholic Church teaches clearly, and has defined at the Council of Trent, that there is only one way to have serious sin forgiven, confession to a priest. Not to say that clearly is to soft-pedal the truth!" What the man said is true – but it's not true enough – it's not the WHOLE truth. I was searching for how to respond, when a lady stood up, shaking and nearly overcome with emotion – and she ended up speaking for me.

"This is not soft-pedaling the truth. I believe what Father is saying....and I'll tell you why. I had a 19-year-old daughter who was killed in a car accident two years ago. She hadn't been going to church for over a year before that and she was living with her boyfriend. But she was a good girl, with a good heart, and nobody is going to tell me that she went to hell!"

One of the big strands of teaching on forgiveness comes from our belief in the Incarnation, the enfleshment of God-in-Christ. We believe that incarnation is an ongoing reality in the body of Christ – US – the Church – and reconciliation – like all sacraments – is a touching of the body of Christ, and consequently, we can have our sins forgiven through touching Christ's body within Christian community and within Eucharist. Confession is a beautiful and important sacrament, one that can really help us to become more spiritually mature; the fact that many Catholics today no longer practice it is a bad sign. BUT it can also be horribly misused in a somewhat pathological way. Confessing weekly is often a sign of something very spiritually immature and is more often about pathology than spirituality. But despite the value and issues of private confession, radically we can and do have our sins forgiven through living and worshiping within Christian community and especially through receiving the Eucharist. Remember we have an absolution at the beginning of every Mass: "May Almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us to everlasting life." These words have power just as the words of absolution in the sacrament of confession have power.

And there are those who will say that this is soft-pedaling the truth. The Catholic tradition, I will be passionately informed, teaches that all serious sin can only be forgiven through explicit confession to a priest. Does not the Council of Trent clearly demand private confession as the condition for the forgiveness of serious sin? Is it wrong to say that in the theology of the Incarnation – upon which is based the belief that when one goes to Eucharist or participates otherwise in Christian community one is touching the hem of Christ's garment and is thus being reconciled? We are aware of Christ's warning about scandalizing others. There are penalties for playing loose with the truth.

BUT WE CAN ALSO DANGEROUSLY REDUCE TRUTH, and I'm often stunned with the almost sense of glee that some Catholics find in narrowly defining the truth and then using their very narrow definition to condemn others who do not believe as they do. They leave out so much of the rich, wide heritage that is the Catholic tradition. I've been studying it for over 40 years and still don't pretend to understand it all. We're dealing with mystery here! It's big – way bigger than any of our articulations – and it's far more beautiful than many seem to think. The truth is simple, but unless it is the simplicity that has passed through the complexity of human experience then it is a childish simplicity, a strident and inhuman simplicity, rather than the simplicity that we can only dimly glimpse in God. Those who feel that the truth of our Catholic faith must be protected with denigration and violent attacks on others may well be insecure in their convictions, frightened to hear a fuller understanding lest they begin to doubt. It is precisely when we are most confident in the teaching of the Church that we should be most open to listen and to learn, and to open our minds and hearts to those who have arrived at conclusions with which we disagree. (adapted from WHAT IS THE POINT OF BEING A CHRISTIAN, Timothy Radcliffe, p. 38-39)

In dealing with the issue of forgiveness of sin, we can also soft-pedal the fullness and power of the Incarnation. Just as we can lack the courage to affirm hard truths because they demand things which go against our grain, we can easily lack the courage to affirm how incredible and far-reaching are the tentacles of the Incarnation and how lavish the mercy of God that is revealed in it. Just think of the millions of saintly Christians – not Catholic – who people so glibly consign to hell if they MUST go to confession in order to be forgiven serious sin. Is God really that stingy with His mercy? What kind of God do we believe in? One depicted by Jesus -- who is rich in mercy, relentless in love? Or do we believe in a God conceived by me -- one who is anxious to consign people to hell. One who so wishes us to be with Him that we believe even after death, in our teaching on Purgatory, that HE STILL works to pull us toward Him, or a God who doesn't much care for His wandering, stumbling people?

I doubt that anyone who takes seriously what Jesus taught us about God would want to challenge the lady who claimed that, despite her daughter's wanderings and her dying without explicit confession she was surely not in hell.

So what do courage – and truth – demand that we say? That there is no forgiveness for serious sin outside the explicit sacrament of reconciliation; or that Christian community and the Eucharist are the body of Christ on earth and that when we touch them with even a modicum of sincerity we are healed? That we take Trent's statement on private confession to mean that, outside explicit private confession, there can be, for any Catholic, no other means of reconciliation; that we take the statement in its proper context and with all its qualifications and affirm, in the name of Trent, that there are ways outside explicit confession to have sins forgiven?

Do courage and truth demand that we teach that only Jesus can forgive sin and that, today, that forgiveness is dispensed only through private confession; or that we affirm, as does Scripture, that we do not replace the body of Christ, that we are not like his body, nor even that we are his mystical body, but that we

are his body, flesh, blood, tangible, in history, the ongoing incarnation, and consequently that when we forgive, Christ forgives; when we bind, Christ binds; when we console, Christ consoles; and when that woman loved and forgave her wandering daughter, Christ loved and forgave that wandering daughter?

In what does the greater danger lie – in soft-pedaling confession or in soft-pedaling and reducing the incredible love and forgiveness that are revealed in the Incarnation? (adapted from Ronald Rolheiser, FORGOTTEN AMONG THE LILIES, p. 168-171) In the end, truth will set us free. But first it might leave us confused. Truth will set us free, but it might first make us mad. Truth will set us free, but it might get us run out of town. Truth will set us free, but it will require us to open our hearts. Amen.

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