



Father Fred's Forty Little Sins as confessed to Mother Agnes

Daily Meditations for Lent

(v) Fifth Week of Lent

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Monday after Fourth Sunday of Lent

Mother Agnes:

How was Mothering Sunday for you, Father?

Father Fred.

It's always such a difficult Sunday now, I find. It's become so commercialised and most families seem to be travelling to see mothers and grandmothers and don't have time to come to Church.

A: But wasn't travelling always part of the tradition? Right back to the time when servant girls and apprentice boys who were living away from home went home to visit their mothers?

F: Yes, I know, but that was different. People used to go to Church more in those days, and had a greater sense of the presence of God and of His importance for their lives.

A: Or perhaps there were fewer alternative things to do on Sundays in those days, and so people had more time and inclination to go to Church. But let's get back to Mothering Sunday. What approach did you take in the service?

F: If the truth be told, I suppose I tried to get the children in the church to feel a little guilty for not doing more to help their mothers throughout the year. Flowers and chocolates on Mothering Sunday are one thing, but they tend to think that's enough for the whole year.

A: So what about you yourself, Father? You take advantage of your position as a priest to manipulate the emotions of children, but do you apply the same teaching to yourself?

It's very convenient, isn't it, to be able to tell others what do to and feel good about it.

F: You always know how to hit the spot, don't you. I do need to go away and think hard about this and get myself sorted out ... Mother.

Tuesday after Fourth Sunday of Lent

Mother Agnes:

I failed to pick up on something you said yesterday, Father. You said that there were children in church on Sunday. Isn't that rather unusual in your church these days? Well done you!

Father Fred:

We did get a few, it's true. It's a pity they don't come more regularly, but I suppose they're all playing football or going to dancing lessons on Sunday mornings most of the time.

A: If that's the case, what do you do to try to attract them to Church and keep them coming?

F: We're hoping to launch a kind of Sunday club for children - we can't call it Sunday School, as that would be such a turn-off to kids these days, but it's the same kind of thing with more fun and games. It's far better to give the children their own thing, separate from the rest of the church, and in any case the adults might find it difficult to have the children there all the time.

A: I notice how you are good at speaking for other people, Father. How much is this really to do with the fact that you yourself don't like being distracted by children when you are taking the service?

F: That's quite unfair, as you well know. I've been a great advocate for children in church over many years. What I really can't stand, though, are the choruses they all go for these days. So simple, and hardly inspiring musically - as I'm sure a devotee of plainchant like yourself would appreciate.

A: You didn't become ordained just to be able to indulge in your own personal musical preferences all the time, Father. You claim to be inclusive in your church - I suggest that you go away and think about the full implications of that for your worship.

F: Praise the Lord.

Wednesday after Fourth Sunday of Lent

Father Fred:

I've been thinking about what you said regarding choruses, Mother.

Mother Agnes:

Oh yes? Have you managed to broaden your understanding of inclusivity overnight, then? Most people in the Church these days are either inclusive or they aren't, and little real change ever takes place.

F: Too true - but let's park that comment for another day. What I meant was that I've realised what's wrong with choruses. They're all too intimate and chummy with God and Jesus - there's no sense of the mystery of God, the unknowability of God, God's ineffable transcendence, apophatic approaches to God, and so on.

A: I'm glad you have a mature theology, Father. But of course that's what your training was for. One would hardly expect anything else. But is that really the kind of language you use in your sermons, even in an intellectual church such as yours? It's hardly surprising children don't come, when even the parents will find it hard to keep up with you.

F: I'm not ashamed of trying to stretch people theologically and help them to grow in their understanding of the faith. And of course we do have to recognise that people are at different points on the theological journey, and cater for all of them. Where I draw the line, though, is keeping people at a level of faith in which God is just their chum, rather than the infinite and totally awe-inspiring Creator of all that exists.

- A: I agree, but do be careful when you talk of other people's faith as something which is within your power to control. Yes, be true to your own understanding of God, but respect the fact that others have a right to theirs as well.
- F: OK ... up to a point ...

Thursday after Fourth Sunday of Lent

Mother Agnes:

I get the impression that underneath your relaxed exterior, Father, you're actually a rather controlling kind of person.

Father Fred:

How could you say that, Reverend Mother? You know full well that I'm perfectly happy for people to do their own thing as long as they don't harm anyone else. Of course I am delighted when I see people growing in faith, but that's between them and God, and not really within my control.

A: Even when you are their spiritual leader? Don't allow yourself to sidestep your responsibility for spiritual leadership completely. But you've actually not fully grasped what I meant. I was referring to the fact that you like to control your life and your routines more than many people do.

F: You can't do much without good organisation, Mother, as you well know. After all, for how many centuries has your religious order structured its days, its months, and its years around liturgical patterns and frameworks?

A: Yes, but within that, we always try to allow space for the unexpected - to build time into the day which allows for God to work in ways we can't predict, for the chance encounter, the conversation which needs to be open ended and not time limited. And to give time to people.

F: I know all this, but I can't stand thinking too much about organisation of my life. It becomes a straitjacket - which I think is what you are saying.

A: That's precisely what I'm not saying, Father. I'm trying to get you to understand that by not being organised, you end up allowing your insatiable appetite for doing things of your choosing to crowd out other things, which are not of your choosing, but which will just happen, if you make space for them. I know that this is a concept which is hard to understand in this world which is driven by activity, targets, goals and the need for achievement.

I suggest that you try not to fill each day in advance. Leave spaces and see what happens. I am confident that you won't be lazy or bored. You might even glimpse what the Church has always known as the working of the Holy Spirit.

Friday after the Fourth Sunday of Lent

Father Fred:

It's so frustrating when people in the congregation think they know about liturgy. I wanted to get rid of the Prayer of Humble Access from the communion service (you know the one - 'We do not presume to come to this your table, trusting in our own righteousness ... ') and there are some who are strongly objecting to this.

Mother Agnes:

What's wrong with the prayer? It's long been an integral part of the service, and is one of Archbishop Cranmer's best pieces of writing.

F: It's too demeaning - all this grovelling before God isn't very Christian. 'We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table ...' and so on - what does that say about a God who is supposed to value human beings?

A: I know it's a fashion in Anglo-Catholic circles to see this prayer as being too Protestant. But do you really think that we earn our salvation? That belief is neither Protestant or Catholic? The heart of this Prayer lies in its message that whatever good deeds we do - and of course these are recognised and valued by God - none of these can take the place of God's overwhelming love (or grace, if you like) by which we are drawn towards him. You can't deny, surely, that we all fall short of his will and purpose for us, and that it is only by God's infinite goodness and mercy that we can be worthy to stand before him. This is what that prayer is all about - the love of a God who loves us in spite of all our failings and shortcomings, and still wants us to be his people. But we shouldn't see God's grace as being dispensed too cheaply and too casually, and regard ourselves as being on the same level as the Creator of the universe.

After all, it was you who complained the other day about people who saw God as their best chum, and wanted to get back to the idea of an awe-inspiring and transcendent God. Surely, Father, you need a little more humility?

Saturday after the Fourth Sunday of Lent

Father Fred:

I remember once reading about the idea that 'humility' comes from the same root as 'humus'. The writer was saying that if we are truly humble, we should be like the humus - the earth - trodden on by people. That's not what I understand as humility - that's degrading.

Mother Agnes:

I agree. But what about our Lord's saying that he came not to be served but to serve? And what about the message he gave when he washed the feet of the disciples, as a slave would do? And what did St Paul say in Philippians about Jesus humbling himself to take the form of a servant? To be a servant or slave in those days was pretty demeaning.

F: Yes, I've long had a problem with that. It's OK for Christ to be like the Suffering Servant described in Isaiah, but that's surely not really for us.

A: Not for priests, maybe - is that what you're saying? What about those people who have no option but to do the dirty jobs - cleaning, caring for the incontinent, collecting and dealing with rubbish, the jobs at the bottom end of the labour market in which you have no choice but to do exactly what the boss says, otherwise you're out of work?

F: I admire them enormously. But we should be working towards a society in which people don't have to do things like that.

A: There will always be people who have to take such work. Jesus was saying that there's something about losing your self-importance, putting aside considerations of earthly status, being fully at the disposal of others, which teaches us about blessedness. I can't fully explain how it works, but it's true.

F: I will really have to think about that more. I can see that you don't earn your way to heaven through meetings and the drawing up of vision statements, but by being alongside those who have been cast out by mainstream society.

A: Yes indeed - and remember that you don't have to be a doormat, but rather a doorway.