



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

Daily Meditations for Lent

(vi) Sixth Week of Lent

By Reverend Christopher Harrison

www.nottinghamchurches.org

Monday after Fifth Sunday of Lent

Mother Agnes:

So how was Sunday, Father Fred?

Father Fred:

We had a splendid service. It was quite a bit longer than usual, because we included a few extra things - special prayers for Lent, a long reading from a modern theological writer, and one or two other unusual items which people really enjoyed.

A: Good - I'm glad you're giving appropriate thought to your services even in advance of Holy Week. But it does sound more like a performance than a service.

F: That's rather unfair - and I don't think that those who contributed would appreciate such a comment.

A: I know it's important that a good number of people should be involved in leading worship, which shouldn't be just focused on the priest. But do you give enough attention, Father, to creating - through all those who contribute to the service - an atmosphere of reverence and prayerfulness, and not merely a series of items for people to listen to?

F: You've put your finger on what lies at the heart of the art of leading worship, Mother. You really should become a bishop one day. At its best, worship should take you beyond yourself into that mysterious divine realm in which we glimpse something of God and emerge better able to cope with the frustrations of everyday life.

A: Well said, Father. And I'm reassured to know that you believe in what you are doing, rather than just heaping up empty phrases, as our Lord once put it.

Tuesday after Fifth Sunday of Lent

Mother Agnes:

Do you think people in your church know that they are saved, Father?

Father Fred:

We don't tend to make such big a thing of all that, Mother Agnes - or rather, we don't usually use the kind of language about salvation that some churches go in for.

A: Really? So you're not sure that your flock are saved? Do I suspect that the Sacrament isn't as successful as the Word in this regard?

F: What I mean is that we don't encourage the kind of smugness which you find among some Christians. I know that we're all saved, in theory (although we could have a long debate about what that really means), but I wouldn't want to encourage people in my church to feel superior to others in this respect. I hate the idea that our faith can make people self-satisfied and pleased with how holy they are. It's a very poor advertisement for the Church.

A: I'm glad you've found a better way than blatant self-righteousness, Father, and are not like the holy man, in Jesus' parable, who looked down proudly and arrogantly on the sinner beside him. But isn't your feeling of superiority over those who sincerely and faithfully make a big thing of being 'saved' almost as bad, when you think about it?

Who are you to judge what God sees in our hearts? How can you fully understand the reasons why people adopt certain forms of words to express their deepest convictions? Surely you know that all words are in any case mere attempts to describe underlying meanings which may be far more complex.

Wednesday after Fifth Sunday of Lent

Mother Agnes:

You look rather out of sorts today.

Father Fred:

It's nothing - really, it isn't.

A: That means it is.

F: Well ... I suppose I have to say I do feel somewhat downcast.

A: And that in someone who usually makes a big thing of not being too swayed by passing emotions ... what's going on, Father?

F: I know that you shouldn't see Church appointments in terms of 'promotion', Reverend Mother, but one does sometimes wonder about the way these things are done. All this modern management stuff about the Church's 'talent pipeline' ... what would Jesus have made of that when he called the first disciples to follow him and then to lead his Church?

A: You really do seem peeved today. Do I detect the sin of jealousy?

F: No, of course not - and if it were so I wouldn't admit it, even to you.

A: It seems to me as if you have just done so. Remember, I've been hearing confessions for decades.

Now go and re-read the parable of the Prodigal Son, and look especially closely at the passage about the jealous elder son.

Thursday after Fifth Sunday of Lent

Father Fred:

I'm sometimes a little hesitant about going to the pub in Lent, Mother Agnes, but I must say it's a good way of keeping in touch with people. Quite a lot of parish work tends to be done there, moreover.

Mother Agnes:

So I suppose that the fact that I live in an enclosed order, without the possibility of such attractions, means that my ministry is impoverished and less effective, then? Of course, it's not unknown for some of the junior members of this community to find ways of bringing the temptations of the village inn within these cloisters, and I have to clamp down on that from time to time.

F: I'm glad to see that they are human, otherwise their spiritual journey would be very dull. But I don't know how all you sisters manage without the constant flow of conversation which we in the outside world can enjoy, especially over a drink. It builds friendship and fellowship, and keeps the mind active.

A: Remember that we are an enclosed order, not a silent order, Father. What I believe we have developed here over the years is the ability to distinguish between conversation and gossip. Gossip is easy, and pubs are full of it. (Some churches aren't much better, mind you).

Ask yourself whether you are in the habit of going in search of gossip, or out of a genuine desire to get alongside others and listen to them. And of course it's not a sin to go and enjoy a drink for its own sake, without making a big thing of Father being just an ordinary bloke.

Friday after the Fifth Sunday of Lent

Father Fred:

My job is certainly varied. It was quite a rewarding day yesterday - I think I sorted out a serious disagreement between two people.

Mother Agnes:

You sound like someone from the Arbitration Service. And don't fall into the current temptation to see ministry as just a job - you should know better.

F: But didn't our Lord say something about peacemakers being blessed? It's quite a challenge to bring about reconciliation between two people, especially when their attitudes have become quite entrenched.

A: So how did you go about that difficult task?

F: I just got them to hear each other's point of view. That seemed to calm them down considerably.

A: You really do talk as if they were troublesome schoolchildren in the playground, Father. I suppose you put them each on a naughty chair.

F: This was serious, Reverend Mother, whatever you might think.

A: But how much did they calm down simply because you were there? Getting two people to hear each other isn't the same as enabling them to listen to each other's point of view.

Sorting out problems like this isn't easy, and people who have fallen out with each other need to do most of the work of reconciliation themselves. You can encourage them to do this, but then it's up to them. By all means get involved, if it doesn't risk taking up an undue share of your time. But don't for a moment take pride in a result which may be only superficial, and hasn't stood the test of time.

Saturday after the Fifth Sunday of Lent

Mother Agnes:

Do you give to beggars, Father Fred?

Father Fred:

Not usually. It's difficult, but the decision has been made easier by the notices which the Council has recently put up telling people not to encourage begging.

I do sometimes buy the Big Issue, but one seller recently told me that some of the other sellers in the area were just doing it to fund their drug habits. Mind you, he probably wanted their trade.

A: You do find it easy to slip into cynicism, don't you?

F: I suppose that if I do, it's because the problem of homelessness and related needs never seems to go away. After all, our Lord said that the poor would always be with us.

A: Perhaps you should engage more with such people. Give them some of your time.

F: I do try, but there's a limit to how much you can do. Our church does try to do its bit to help, however.

A: Never allow yourself to be sucked into defeatism and apathy, Father, even when the scale of a problem seems enormous. Never allow the spark of compassion to be snuffed out.

Each time even a spark of true compassion is shown to someone in need, and each time a person learns afresh what it means to be trusted and valued, a seed is sown in their heart, and new hope becomes possible.