

HOMILY – 5TH SUNDAY OF LENT – 18 MARCH 2018

As I preach this sermon at this Mass, Cardinal Keith O'Brien, former Archbishop of St Andrews and Edinburgh has died, at a hospital in Newcastle. Yesterday was his 80th Birthday. He ordained me in 1993, he appointed me Parish Priest to Broxburn and Winchburgh and one hundred other parishes since 1985. He confirmed thousands of young people throughout his 28 years as Bishop, gave hundreds of sermons, celebrated hundreds of masses and ordained over fifty priests to the Archdiocese, one of the last being a priest who was dying of cancer in a Manchester hospital, took part in the election of Pope Benedict. When his death is announced, the media will descend and inevitably will focus on his failings, not on the many good things that he accomplished as a Bishop. Yes, he did betray God and his people, by his own personal sins but remember God judges the whole person. How can I preach about a merciful God if in the same breath, I am not truly merciful to those who repent of their sins? In the beautiful psalm as Mass, we hear the song of King David, who laments his sin of adultery and cries out to God, "Have mercy on me, God, in your kindness, in your compassion, blot out my offence. O wash me more and more from my guilt and cleanse me from my sin".

Cardinal O'Brien would have prayed this psalm many times throughout his life, I hope he did so with sincerity. The psalm can only have an effect on us if we pray it with sincerity and contrition. The God of truth is not interested in empty religious gestures, if our inner being has not been deeply moved.

The underlying tone of the psalm is that God does not want the damnation of the sinner but neither that he/she may live. Just as the Church is not here to damn people to hell but to assist in their spiritual recovery. The 'non-faith' world, on the other hand, does not seek mercy. It wants humiliation, suffering and banishment forever. Revenge is almost equal to the depravity of the original sinful act. The brutality of the Middle Ages, perversely encouraged public executions. As it says so beautifully in the psalm, rather than revenge, teach the transgressor your ways, so that sinners may return to you.

As we approach Holy Week, The Passion of Our Lord and we contemplate the death of Cardinal O'Brien, let us remind ourselves that Christ, free from sin, died on a cross for sinners. He died for the guilty so that we, all of us sinners, may be set free for the eternal life. Christ died for the sinful so that they may be redeemed. In some ways, we don't get that. We find it hard to believe that the Son of God would die for someone who has sinned against God. But if you listen carefully to the Gospel today, you hear Jesus saying, "And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself". How can He possibly do that? Because He has overthrown the power of evil. Christ dies, so that we might live. This is the price God is prepared to pay to bring us back home. I know its hard to believe and many think we don't deserve it. But listen, its not about what we deserve, it is far beyond that. It is what God desires for us. We find it very hard to believe that our sins can be forgiven, if we truly repent. Why? Because we doubt in unconditional love. We really can't accept that the sins of our past life are forgiven when we repent. But this is wrong, it is doubting the teaching of Christ. It is refuting the promise of the eternal covenant. We must die to self and live for Christ. Frequently I get people, at Confession, who keep bringing up the sins of their early life. Afraid that they still have a hold on them. This is heresy, semi pelagianist heresy and you must stop it now. Once you have confessed a sin, truly repented, been granted penance and absolution, that sin is taken from you. Remember the words of Holy Scripture. "A humble contrite heart O Lord, you will not spurn".

Let us pray for Cardinal O'Brien, for all the dying, that they may have made their peace with God, before they take their last breath and never, never, never, doubt the limits of God's mercy.

