

“And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live”
Num 21:9

With so many reports of war, of countries attacking and bombing one another, of men and women and children dying through violence, and even of political assassinations, we might so easily suppose that our own poor sins hardly weigh in the balance, that they are insignificant compared to the horrors that are going on in the world around us. Yet today's readings sound a warning note against the temptation to complacency. After all, the People of Israel had not been guilty of murderous intent; only – as it says at the start of today's First Reading – of impatience, and of speaking against God and against Moses. Yet we must tread warily with regard to our own sins.

First, we must understand what a sin is. The definition of a sin is, ‘an offence against God.’ Anything that offends God is a sin. What we call a ‘material sin’ takes place when God's law is transgressed but the person transgressing the law doesn't realize that his action is sinful. In this case, his culpability is lessened or even absent, but God's majesty is still offended. By contrast, a ‘formal sin’ is when the person knows his action will be sinful and still consents to it and goes ahead with it.

There is also the distinction between mortal and venial sins. A mortal sin cuts us off from the charity – the love – of God. If you imagine our souls to be like vases filled with the water of sanctifying grace, then a mortal sin is when a crack appears in the bottom of the vase and all of the water floods out. A mortal sin means that we have – even if only temporarily – turned away from God. The damage from a mortal sin can only be repaired in the Sacrament of Confession, and we cannot receive Holy Communion again until we have been to Confession. By contrast, a venial sin damages our friendship with God: it is as if we have spilt some of the water from the vase. Most of us commit venial sins again and again,

and whilst it is true that lots of venial sins do not add up to a mortal sin, nonetheless we should confess them next time we go to Confession.

It is helpful to understand the differences between material and formal sins, and between mortal and venial sins, because they help us to understand a little bit better just what our relationship with God is. We may not carry much guilt when we sin even though we didn't intend to (which is what happens with material sins) but we have still offended God's goodness and justice, and as such we have added to the general and widespread damage done to our own souls and to the overall state of a damaged and fallen human race.

All sins do harm to our souls; all sins, no matter how small we might think them, mar the beauty of our souls. In short, all sins poison us and our human nature has been weakened by that poison, and we can only be healed from this poison by the antidote of God's mercy.

And this is where today's feast of the Triumph of the Cross comes in. Just as the People of Israel were poisoned by the venom of serpents in the desert, so we are poisoned by the venom of the devil when he tempts us to sin. And just as Moses fashioned a bronze serpent which, when the poisoned victim gazed upon it, brought healing, so we – poisoned by sin as we are – can be healed by turning to the medicine of Christ's Cross.

But here's the rub. If our bodies were poisoned, we would need to get to a doctor so that an anti-dote could be administered. Likewise, if our souls are poisoned through sin then we need to get to the Physician who ransoms, heals, restores, and forgives us. In other words, we have to be active in seeking out our own healing by going to Confession regularly – every month – and allowing the purifying balm of sanctifying grace to be poured into the wounds of our souls.

At the end of this morning's Mass we shall venerate our relic of the True Cross, two tiny splinters taken from the Cross of Christ which is now kept in the Basilica of the

Holy Cross in Rome. Imitating the action of Good Friday we shall come up to the altar rails, kneel down, and kiss the relic, venerating the Wood of the Cross on which our Redeemer died for our sakes. We who perform this action will be kneeling down to say sorry for our sins and begging for God's mercy and forgiveness. In effect, we will be turning to Christ lifted high on the Cross, just as the People of Israel turned to the bronze serpent raised high on its pole, and we shall be seeking the antidote for the pride and selfishness of our sins that comes to us through the medicine of Christ's humility and sacrifice.

Our task, in a war-torn world, is not to think our sins insignificant by comparison but to do our small part, through our acts of penance, to bring God's grace into a world that so desperately needs it. After all, the Kingdom of God can only grow on earth if we individuals grow in personal holiness.