

The most surprising thing in today's Gospel is the lack of surprise when the four not-to-be-deterred friends dig their way in to the house through the roof. There must have been a shower, if not a cascade, of dust and mud and straw upon those below. Peter, whose house this probably is, must have been seething and wondering how he will be able to pay for the repairs now that he has given up his day job. Did he then realise that Jesus as a 'tekton', a wood-worker, builder, odd job man would be just the person to carry out the necessary remedial work? But none of this is mentioned in the matter-of-fact telling of the story by Mark.

Instead of a rebuke the companions receive implicit praise. "Seeing their faith" Jesus speaks to the paralytic. Notice it is not the sick man's faith which leads to the miracle being performed. It is the faith of his colleagues, their determination and refusal to be put off by the size of the crowd filling the house, their trusting confidence brings about the healing.

Here is a simple reminder that we are not individuals making our isolated, lonely way on our own to the Kingdom of God. We are a community of faith. We have a responsibility for each other; we depend on one another. We cannot gain salvation on our own. Because he had determined friends the paralytic is cured of his illness and is reconciled to God through his sins being forgiven.

The sceptical scribes are shocked at the idea that Jesus can forgive sins. They are right to wonder, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" To allow that Jesus can forgive sins would be to say that Jesus is the equivalent of God; that this man has God power and authority. Something Mark has been emphasising from the first words of his Gospel. Now the power of his word of healing is equated with his word of forgiveness. It is another indicator for the discerning reader/listener identity of the identity of this perplexing man.

As Lent approaches, we should begin to think of the forgiveness of sins and the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It is not a popular sacrament these days. People often say, "Surely it is good enough for me to say 'sorry' to God on my own, in my own way. I don't need to go to tell a priest my sins, I can just tell God I'm sorry."

And of course what they are saying is true. It is good and necessary and important to say 'sorry' to God in our hearts when we are aware of having done wrong. But it is not the whole truth. When we know we have hurt someone we know we have to say 'sorry' to them and try and make up in some way. To say "I don't need to say 'sorry' to you because I've already said sorry to God" would

not impress and would certainly not improve the relationship.

When we sin we break a rule of God but God is not offended in the way that a Zeus or a Jupiter sulks in the stories of Homer or Virgil when mortals have not done as they wished. Nothing we do can hurt God. When we sin we hurt ourselves and each other. Sin damages our relationships with other people and so damages the Church, the community of faith. Since we can't go round apologising to everyone for all that we have done wrong, we go to a representative of the Church to express our sorrow to the Church. That is the role of the priest in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. He represents the Church and in the name of the Church he gives absolution. He does not say, "God absolves you..."; he says, "I absolve you..." He speaks for his sisters and brothers in the Church.

Confession is not something most people need to do frequently. Two or three times a year is probably right for most of us - in the penitential seasons of Advent and Lent, and if on retreat or pilgrimage, and if we are aware of committing serious sin - sin that prevents us receiving Holy Communion. Confession is one of the ways in which our relationship with God is made whole. One of the ways God, in St Paul's words of our second reading, one of the ways God is able to say 'Yes' to us; able to affirm us. There are other ways - private prayer, the penitential rite that we say at the start of every Mass, acts of self denial, works of charity, all are forgiving, healing things, improving our relationship with God and God's people.

But sometimes we need to give expression to what we are like. Often times we only know how we feel and what we think when we have to find the words to say what our thoughts and feelings are. Just as importantly there are times when we need to hear that we are forgiven.

As the paralytic would have lost out if he had not had purposeful and determined friends who formed a community of faith and brought him to the person who could heal him spiritually as well as physically so we belong to a community of faith whose words of healing are spoken by the representative of that faith-body, the priest, in the name of the community as well as in the name of Christ.