**The wounding of contrition.**

Advent is both a penitential season and a time of waiting for God’s incarnation. Both these themes have inspired today’s reflection.

Confession for me is a recounting to another, (often only in my head to God), my sins: those thoughts, acts or omissions that separate me from God. It is a helpful, necessary act but it can become problematic if I remain focussed only on what **I** have done and regret. I might be tempted to either try harder and to make amends or to wallow despairingly in guilt and shame. Knowing that a true confession undoubtedly leads to God’s forgiveness, am I am in danger of placing myself, instead of God, at the centre as the initiator both of the problem and the solution?

This Advent, I am focussing on *contrition*, the feeling of remorse at our sinfulness. It is a heart response that emphasises the emotional and spiritual impact of our sinful state, rather than merely itemising the problems to be fixed. And to this outpouring of the heart’s distress comes God’s response. Our God is always seeking to draw closer to us and withholds nothing, even coming in human form to show us the way home.

Contrition is to recognise that the false self we present to the world to hide our insecurity, the defensive shell that keeps God out, diminishes us. Contrition leads us to desire the closeness with God we can’t ourselves bring about. Finally contrition brings us to ask God for healing and that request is sufficient to create a chink in our self-preserving armour into which God inserts the knife. And it hurts!

But this wounding is for our benefit. As St John of the Cross writes, ‘You have wounded me in order to cure me, O divine hand, and you have put to death in me what made me lifeless, what deprived me of God’s life in which I now see myself live…And your only begotten Son, O merciful hand of the Father, is the delicate touch by which you touched me with the force of your cautery and wounded me.’

Contrition then leads to liberation of which Paul writes, ‘It is for freedom that Christ has set us free’ (Gal.5:1a). It takes me to the cross. It is by Christ’s wounds we are healed. I can’t conceive of the pain and death Jesus bore to show us the Father’s love. As I shift my attention from my self-inflicted pain to Jesus on the cross, I am awe-struck at his compassion and become truly contrite for the pain I have caused the one I love.

There is something of a circular motion here. In drawing us to God’s love, the Spirit makes us aware of all that we hold back. Our contrition is the ‘yes’ to God’s offer of restoration. When I recognise that the cost of my woundedness is as nothing when I recall the costliness to God, I am filled with more love for God. So there is a spiral of increasing love that spills over into the world around.

Our liberation leads to compassion. ‘You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.’ (Gal.5:13) There is a link between our longing for God, our contrition at falling short, and the love that flows from God to us, and so compassion overflowing through us into the world. Julian of Norwich requested from God three wounds: true contrition, natural compassion and an unshakeable longing for God. Might we be courageous enough to do the same?

**Leading us into prayer:** Isaiah 57:15

‘For this is what the high and exalted One says – he who lives for ever, whose name is holy: ‘I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite’.

**Leading us out of prayer:** Isaiah 53:5

‘But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.’