

‘If in my name you ask for anything,
I will do it,’
says John’s Jesus in his long farewell speech to the disciples.

Stephen,
the first Christian to get stoned,
strictly single entendre,
asks for lots of things
in our reading from Acts.

‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them,’
he cries, as the missiles fly.
He was being ironic,
making a rare joke in a pretty humourless exercise.
Because the Greek word for sin
‘αμαρτια
is a technical term borrowed from archery:

it literally means missing the mark,
missing the bull’s eye
for which we were intended.

‘Lord, do not hold this missing the mark against them,’
would have had them rolling in the aisles
as their stones hit the mark.
They were on target
but so off target.

Asking in Jesus’ name
not to hold their sin against them,
or our sin against us.
But do we have any consciousness of sin any more?
Aren’t we all reasonable well-meaning people,
with any lapses
due to harsh environment,

or due to moments in ancient shadows and twilights
where childhood strayed,
or due to the fact that the vicar
dropped us in the font at our baptism?
'It's not so much me missing the mark, Lord.
It's life's target that keeps infuriatingly moving.'

I'm not so sure.

My home communicants always say a confession
before receiving communion,
and the thought often crosses my mind
as to what precise sins they've got up to
in their housebound state
since I absolved them just a fortnight before.
On my ordination retreat 27 years ago,
we said confession at the Eucharist before breakfast

and then confession at Morning Prayer
immediately after breakfast:
we must have been heinous sinners indeed
to manage to commit a sin over
the stale Bishopthorpe muesli
with the Archbishop's beady eye upon us!

With my home communicants

I treat confession and absolution
as an opportunity to tackle the things that trouble them.
We're all troubled,
we all seethe with regret or shame.
Old people in particular
with nothing much else going on
tend to dwell on things.
'Lord Jesus, set them free,

do not hold all that against them,'

is my prayer.

But old people don't have a monopoly on being troubled.

I read this week something by James Catford,

boss of the Bible Society,

before that he was my boss at HarperCollins.

'I longed for the life that the Bible offered me.

But I was deeply frustrated,

and largely disillusioned,

by my ability ever to step into that life –

the life that is life indeed.

Jesus' own words on the Sermon on the Mount

were not to be anxious,

yet I was anxious.

He said don't be angry,

yet I got mad with people.

And he said there really is no need to judge,

and yet all too often I compared myself to others.

How was I to escape?'

And then this happened to him.

'Last year I flew to Seattle

to sit on San Juan Island

for just four days with a trusted friend,

Bill Vaswig, aged 75.

There, with half an eye whale watching,

I entered more fully than I had ever done before

the discipline of confession.

All one evening I wrote page after page

about my life

as best as I could remember it.

Next morning we got started

as I carefully walked my friend through my life,
making my confession as I went.'

Occasionally Bill asked a question for clarification,
but mostly he kept silent.

At times he even looked bored and asked,

"when are we going get onto the interesting bits?"

He didn't seem to be taking this exercise as seriously as I was!

But I pressed on,

determined that I wouldn't underplay things

and then later talk myself

into needing to do the whole painful exercise all over again.

Once this profound experience was finished,

it was finished!

Never to be revisited again.

Bill, a Lutheran minister,

then put his hands on my shoulders and prayed for me.

We took the pages I had written

and placed them in a baking tray from the kitchen,

lit them and went outside.

There in the gentle breeze of a day drawing to its close

we watched as the paper caught light,

turned to ash and drifted out to sea.

"We can stop now,"

I said as we got chilly when the fire blew out.

"No," he said, the gravest he had sounded all day.

"We'll wait to see it all disappear."

And we did.

'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.'

It's not a bad exercise.

Take your time, write down your life's story,

all your regrets, all that troubles you,

pull no punches.

And then burn it.

Let it go.

'Lord, do not hold this missing the mark against me.'

assured of Jesus' promise:

'If in my name you ask for anything,

I will do it.'

Of course Stephen asked for something else.

'Lord Jesus receive my spirit.'

Spirit is a loaded word.

Spirits are alcohol made concentrated by being distilled.

Our Spirit

is our life distilled,

our very essence,

so that it has a knock out quality.

The Greek word used for spirit is

πνευμα,

the pneuma which gives pneumatic tyres their bounce.

Lord Jesus, receive my life's bounce.

That's the flip side of all this wallowing in sin stuff,

which can get you so down.

Evangelicals so get on my nerves

when they describe life

before their conversion as so squalid and murky.

When I guess it wasn't anything of the kind.

Just dull.

Often visitors to this Church

feel moved to leave notes on my stall,
with cheery messages such as 'Resign!'
or 'Be born again!'
or tracts lecturing me on the perils of Catholicism.
Most recently I was left this rather sweet little poem:

Once, when in passion
of guilt and unbelief
I turned my thoughts to God on high
and sought from him relief:
'My heart is black, my sins are foul,
of sinners I'm the chief.'
But my guardian angel, stooping low,
whispered from behind,
'Beware the sin of pride, my son,

You're nothing of the kind.'

Which reminds me of the story of a teenage girl
making her confession.

'Father, I keep staring into the mirror and saying,
"Jane, you are beautiful."

Is that the sin of pride or vanity?'

'Neither, my dear, just a mistake,' the priest replied,
looking lovingly
on the rather plain young woman before him.

Don't just look at where you've missed the target;
look at where you've hit the target,
smack on,

and be proud of those moments.

‘Lord Jesus, receive those moments

where I’ve had a spring in my step

and a glint in my eye,

and my life, for once, had oomph.’

‘If in my name you ask for anything,

I will do it,’

Ask God for permission to rejoice

over those bits of your life

where you really did feel

he had made you

the teeniest bit lower than the angels.

There’s a lovely Saki short story

set in a stuffy railway carriage

full of misbehaving children,

with a beleaguered bachelor gent

squashed into a corner.

‘The bachelor said nothing

out loud,’

Saki quips as the children’s behaviour gets worse and worse.

St Stephen’s life is most interesting

for what he didn’t say out loud

Rather his actions, his grace, has a positive glow about it:

the man who was appointed to relieve the poor,

to minister to orphans and widows,

the man who was made deacon,

made servant,

to free up the apostles for their important work of evangelism,

actually said more by what he did

than a thousand of their sermons.

He took that grace even unto death.

And there was one who watched his death,
who guarded the coats
of those throwing the stones,
like a little boy guarding the coats of the bigger boys
running around the stony football field.

He watched
as the light of grace from Stephen's dying face
shone on him.

And ate into him,
and changed him,
and prepared him to receive another light on the Damascus
Road.

'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'

'If in my name you ask for anything,
I will do it,'

Perhaps we'll do our best asking
by saying nothing at all.

Simply living a Christ-like life
will be the best prayer,
the best way of changing those around us
whose happiness and wholeness we desire.

Stephen was executed outside the city wall,
and ended up saying almost exactly the same words
as Christ said on the cross.

He was Christ-like even unto death.

What of Christ will people see in us this day,
this week,
this lifetime?

'If in my name you ask for anything,
I will do it,'

Lord, make us just like you. Amen.