

19th September 2020

Shame

**“Oh, what'll I do with the herrings' heids?
What'll I do with the herrings' heids?
I'll make them into loaves of breid,
Herrings' heids, loaves of breid, and all sorts of things.
The herring is the king of the sea; the herring is the fish for me.
Sing, fa la la la lie do, fa la la la lie do, fa la la la lie do, lie day!”**

Traditional children's song

During one of the long summer breaks when I was training for the ministry, I worked as a labourer with a squad of Council workmen repairing what was then a single-track road between Mallaig and Fort William. The road was busy and the fish-lorries carrying their cargo from the fishing-grounds on Scotland's west coast to the markets in the south were a common sight. Cue for a devious ploy – and a long-hidden confession.

Word would be relayed to us that a fish-lorry was close by, and the JCB driver would block the road with the lorry several places back in the line. I was on the “Stop-Go” board to control the traffic flow. Another man engaged the lorry-driver in deep conversation, while several of the lads were round the back of the truck untying the tarpaulin and stealing quantities of herring, each fish thrown deftly to the senior-labourer hidden out of sight behind a bush, who deposited the herring in a black bin-bag. When the bag was full, a series of signals brought the ploy to an end. I released the traffic, and everything – fish-lorry included – moved on. Later in the day, the herring were gutted in a nearby burn, and we all – yes, me included – had copious quantities of filleted fresh herring for tea.

Writing this, I am red-faced with shame. Youthful naivete or being scared to say no? I have no excuse. I did wrong. I've no one to apologise to. But I'm sorry. I promise never to steal herring from a fish-lorry again.

Even fifty years after the event we can confess our mistakes. So, who do we need to say sorry to today – ourselves, someone we've hurt, our confessor, or our God? However we do it, I hope we're suitably red-faced when we're thinking about it and we resolve ... never to do it again!

A prayer for today

Oh dear. I'm sorry ... again! Amen

*An original reflection by © Tom Gordon
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