22nd February 2026

Cavorting

"The man hath penance done, and penance more will do."

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.*

With Ash Wednesday being the start of Lent, penance is on my mind. I wasn't sure I should share this story with you, but I'm going to anyway.

Father O'Reilly was hearing confessions in his church one evening when he was aware that a stranger had entered the Confessional. Once he'd heard the man's confession – offered in a distinctly foreign accent – and given the appropriate penance, he asked the man if he was visiting the town. "I'm with the circus that's just arrived, Father," the man replied. "Well now, isn't that wonderful," the priest responded. "And what do you do in the circus? An acrobat, or lion-tamer, or ringmaster perhaps?" "None of those, Father. I'm a clown. I tumble, and juggle, and fall about, and do tricks, to make people laugh, especially the children."

The priest was delighted. "Goodness me! I adore clowns. But since I'll not get to the circus before it moves on, would show me some of your tricks before you leave? I would *love* that!" "Of course, Father. I'd be delighted!" And with that, the clown slipped out of the confessional, tumbled up the aisle, juggled with three of the Service Books, did a cartwheel and headed out through the door of the church walking on his hands, with Father O'Reilly's applause ringing in his ears. Just then, two elderly ladies arrived. And seeing the clown cavorting around, one whispered to the other, "Well, Maggie, if that's what Father O'Reilly is giving out as a penance tonight, I'm off home to change my knickers!"

No offence meant! But then, might there be a thought too? What does penance do? The priest offers the words of absolution after a confession, of course, because God forgives the sins. And a penance might be a prayer, a service, or some work of mercy, towards spiritual healing and reconciliation with God. But does that make us perfect? Of course not. Some change will be needed – and not just in your underwear either. And there will be *more* penance, and *more* change, and *more* penance required thereafter. Coleridge is right. It's a constant process, for penance will always be needed as we strive to do better – because we're all inclined to do some cavorting around, aren't we?

A prayer for today

A time of penitence reminds me of my mistakes. May it also help me to change. Amen

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