

I want to describe for you, as briefly as possible, how I see this week's readings in light of my formative "worldly" years. And I ask for your trust in advance, that, talking about myself, I will not slip too far into self-indulgence.

I often remind you that I came to faith as a mature adult — as mature, at least, as I could be without having it!

And I am beginning to think that, probably more than any other thoughts I have to share with people raised in the faith, it is reflecting on the Bible in light of my three & a half decades living in & of the world — *this*, above all else, is what I have to offer you.

Only this week, in a meeting with a group of believers, I heard despair in the voice of one member, a middle-aged man who pointed to members of the church who — rather than passing on Christ's life-giving message of love; rather than offering others' comfort & strength — have been destructive forces in the lives of others.

In addition to the Residential Schools, a few other examples of abuse by clergy & other church leaders were mentioned.

This man daily endeavoured to lead a life in Jesus' name, in loving service to others — but I could see he was downcast about the Church, & could use some lifting up.

And so I shared my own experiences a little.

My own mother worked with children who survived abuse, & the first distinct idea I remember forming for the word "priest" was "violation of trust."

I know, it must sound so shocking to those of you who have known only priests who have honoured their sacred trust!

But there's no purpose airbrushing the world's soul — it is badly fallen! And ignoring it, we must ignore Jesus' command that we be "wise as serpents."

You see, the world has a way of sneaking up behind us & biting us on the heels sometimes.

The man I mentioned, who shared his despair over the Church, had not been inoculated, in the Spirit, against snake bites.

And so he could only *take the pulse* of the world. And the world is dying.

So while the man's heart was centred in the teachings of the one true faith, the world's poison got into him, & he started thinking after the world's fashion.

I say this because, in my own experience, that's exactly how I thought, before my eyes were opened:

What bothered me most about the Church was witnessing hypocrisy among self-identifying Christians.

How can the Easter message be trusted if its messengers cannot be?

I know that question weighs on some of you sometimes.

And so I repeat here what I said to the man despairing.

First, I told him where I come from, agreeing with him that, at least for some people, faithless Christians have made irreparable brand damage to the sweet name of Jesus.

But then I shared my own experience of walking through a few European museums in my younger days, & that — even with a head full of poisoned ideas about the Church, I was transfixed by certain paintings of Christian stories.

Facing the image of Jesus in paintings, I could see something much more than mere humanity in his eyes.

He showed no sin, but gave himself for the sins of the world.

Another image that stood out to me represented the day's reading from the Book of Acts, in which St. Stephen is stoned to death.

Something about Stephen's last words gripped onto me & has never let go since: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

A few weeks ago we read from Matthew's gospel, "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (16:19).

And in today's gospel, Jesus assures the disciples,

"I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it."

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

St. Stephen's final words show very clearly that he acts in Jesus' name — showing forth Christ in his self-giving act of love — & confirming Jesus' words from the day's gospel: "Very truly, I tell

you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do.”

“Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

The fact that St. Paul was present during this stoning shows that Jesus’ word is true.

As Eugene Peterson paraphrases Jesus in *The Message* :

“From now on, whatever you request along the lines of who I am & what I am doing, I’ll do it. That’s how the Father will be seen for who he is in the Son. Whatever you request in this way, I’ll do it.”

And this is my answer to those that point to our failures, & to the times our words & deeds contravene Christ’s message — let us trust that Jesus will be right here with us, every step of the way — & looking to the life of Stephen, go & do likewise.