

Third Sunday of Easter

In the Gospel we see the Risen Jesus showing his disciples his wounds and speaking of 'repentance for the forgiveness of sins'. They needed to hear this for they were very conscious of their own sins. They had let fear overwhelm them even to fleeing from the garden and leaving Jesus alone. Fear was still governing their lives as they hid behind locked doors. Even the news of the empty tomb brought to them by the women couldn't shift them. They desperately needed to experience the presence of the living Jesus among them and to be assured of his forgiveness. However there is more to this scene than the offer of forgiveness for the disciples. Forgiveness is to be 'preached to all the nations'. We all sin in different ways and Jesus wants us all to know that he is present to us, too. There is no need for us to remain locked in our sins. Jesus assures us that we, too, can be forgiven.

Let us begin by reflecting on our own experience, for we know what it is to forgive and to be forgiven. We know also what it is like to be not ready to be forgiven or to offer forgiveness. The word forgiveness expresses well the key element. Forgiveness really happens when the person who is offended continues to give him/herself in love to the person who caused the offence, and when the person who caused the offence knows that the person he/she has offended truly welcomes the return of love.

We all know times when we would like to forgive, we may even say 'I forgive you', but we are not ready to offer ourselves in love. We are still hurting too much, we are still too bitter. We may even be ready to forgive and our offering is truly genuine, but we know that the person who offended us hasn't really changed and so forgiveness is not yet possible. We all know, too, the experience of having offended someone. We long for their forgiveness and we are willing to do whatever is needed to regain love, but the person we have offended either does not want to forgive or is not yet ready to forgive even though they may want to.

In other words we know that forgiveness is only real when there is a mutual giving of self in love to the other. The Gospel makes this clear when Jesus speaks of repentance. For forgiveness to happen there must be a change of mind and heart. There must also be a change in behaviour. If I am hurting someone, and I feel uncomfortable with the ensuing tension, and I feel sorry and say it but I continue to behave in the same hurting way, of course real forgiveness is not possible, nor is the consequent reconciliation and the joy that comes through a mutual gift of self in love. The person offended may be ready to forgive and even desperately want to forgive. The person who caused the offence may be feeling terrible and want love restored. But we all know from our personal experience that forgiveness is not possible without repentance – that is to say, without a change in behaviour.

It is here that we come to the key insight offered to us in today's Gospel. How do we come to repentance? What is it that enables us to change our behaviour and so make forgiveness possible? Jesus is the one offended and it is he who makes the approach. Furthermore, he shows his disciples 'his hands and his feet'. He shows them, and he shows us, his wounds. Notice, he doesn't accuse them. Their own conscience and their shame is doing that. He shows them his wounds. There are two ways of revealing our hurts. One is as a reminder of the way others have caused us to suffer. In this way we highlight their offence. This is not what Jesus is doing. Nor does he hide his wounds pretending that he was not hurt, that it doesn't matter. Of course it

matters. They know that. No. Jesus shows his wounds, but he does so in love. The wounds were inflicted on him by others, including his disciples through their failure of faith. The wonderful thing about Jesus is not that he was wounded, but that he kept loving throughout his passion. Love poured out from his pierced heart and the cleansing water and the life-giving blood issued from his pierced side. Love poured out from his broken heart and broken body. It was this that he showed his disciples when he showed them his wounds, and it was this outpouring of love that made possible the change of heart and behaviour, which in turn made possible forgiveness and mutual self-giving in love.

Knowing this, we cry out with the Psalmist in today's Responsorial Psalm: 'Let the light of your face shine upon us, O Lord, and we shall be saved'(Psalm 4:6). We are reminded of the words spoken by the risen Jesus to the community in Ephesus: 'I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in with you and eat with you, and you with me'(Apocalypse 3:20). Of course, showing our hurts with love does not necessarily bring about a change in the person who has wounded us. Notice that Jesus is knocking, but we must choose to open the door, or the feast will not take place. Nothing is to be gained by pretending a change has taken place when it has not. However, if we want a restoration of love, there is no other way. We must be realistic and truthful about the real situation, and not allow our need for love to seduce us into wishful thinking and the games that co-dependency involves us in. But Jesus shows us that the only way forward is to remain honest in acknowledging our wounds and to remain ready to offer love if and when the person who has offended us shows by their actions that they repent of the hurt and are ready to accept your love and to return it.

One of the factors that enabled Jesus to continue loving was his awareness of our human weakness. You remember his words from the cross: 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do'(Luke 23:34). This is surely a key for our own readiness to continue offering love to the person who has offended us. Peter picked this up in today's First Reading: 'I know that neither you nor your leaders had any idea what you were really doing'(Acts 3:17). He goes on to say: 'Now you must repent and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out'. Repentance is essential for forgiveness, but repentance is made possible only when the one offended shows their wounds but in such a way as to show that they want to continue loving and are also ready to accept that the one causing the offence was not fully aware of what they were doing. Even with people we know well, we cannot fully realise what has happened to them during their life and how much their behaviour is influenced by their past – often in ways of which they themselves are unaware.

You know that I am not suggesting that we live in pretence or denial. In today's Second Reading John highlights the difference between words and actions. It is not enough to say of Jesus 'I know him'. We must 'keep his commandments'. Nothing is to be gained, says John, in 'refusing to admit the truth'(1John 2:4). Jesus himself could be scathing in his condemnation of those whose lives were riddled with hypocrisy. However for us it is wise to acknowledge our own ignorance of the influences that affect the behaviour of others or the motives that drive them. We are all sinners, whether in a particular situation we are the one causing an offence or the one offended. It helps to remember this. If we are finding it hard to forgive, let us remember John's words: 'we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, who is just; he is the sacrifice that takes our sins away, and not only ours but the whole world's'(1John 2:2).

In coming to this Eucharist we have answered the invitation of God to be present on Calvary. Let us thank God for the love that is poured out over us from the wounds of Jesus. May our awareness of his love awaken us to change our lives where change is necessary and so open the way for forgiveness and the love for which we long. As we watch Jesus in today's Gospel may we learn that when we are the one offended it is up to us to make the first move. It may take time for us to be ready to make it. It is worth waiting till we are ready, for then we can show our hurt to the one who has hurt us, but show it in such a way as to offer love. Please God our offer of love will bring about a change, not only in word but in truth and in action in the one who has hurt us. If so we will enjoy a restored communion in love. If not, we at least are free from reacting out of our hurt; we at least are free to offer love. We cannot pretend things are other than they really are and we cannot behave as though love has been restored when it has not. But we are ready for love's restoration if and when the person who offended us acknowledges the offence, changes their behaviour, welcomes our love and offers love in return.

As Jesus' disciples, let us do what he does, knowing that it is our readiness as the offended person to offer love that makes repentance and so forgiveness possible.