

## Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time

We recognise ourselves in the man in today's Gospel when we are suffering a special kind of paralysis, the worst kind of paralysis – the paralysis brought about by sin. The Greek word translated 'sin' in our text means 'missing the mark'. Sometimes we 'miss the mark', we fail to behave appropriately, because we don't know or because of the way we have been brought up. We speak of this as 'Original Sin' — the sin that comes from our origins. We know, however, that there are times when we choose to say Yes to sin, when we fail to resist its attraction though we know we are able to do so. Whatever the measure of our personal responsibility, the fact is that we are sinners who so often 'miss the mark', and the result of sin is a paralysing, to a greater or lesser extent, of our spirit.

Jesus knew our fears and our insecurity. He knew the pain of rejection. He knew what it was like to be misunderstood and wrongly judged. He knew what it was like to feel abandoned not only by friends but also by God. He showed us that sin is no answer to any of these experiences. He also showed us that it is possible to be human and not sin. More than that, he witnessed to the truth that to give in to sin is to fall short of what as human beings we are called and graced to be. The good news of which he is the herald is that nothing can separate us from God's love, and no circumstance can prevent us loving, no matter how limited our capacity to love may be.

To sin is one thing. To remain bound in sin is another. Whatever our sin, there is a liberating power at work in us that is greater than our sin, and Jesus knew the importance of forgiveness. We, too, know this from our own life experience. Wittingly or unwittingly we hurt others. Love that is not expressed in forgiveness will soon die. We would all end up locked into our past errors, sins, misunderstandings and hurts.

Jesus tells the paralysed man that his sins are forgiven. Notice that he says this after seeing their faith. Forgiveness does not happen by some magical power unrelated to the condition of the sinner. Forgiveness requires faith. We are called to trust God and to listen to God's word, ready and willing to do God's will. Where this disposition is present, all that love can do will be done, as it is faith that removes all obstacles to the working of the mysterious power of God's creating, healing and liberating love.

Sometimes people say that the way to heal is to bury the past and forget the hurt. We are especially tempted to do this when forgiveness is refused. However, we all know that we will never really succeed in burying the past and forgetting the hurt, and, however much we try to cover over the wound, it will keep festering. Whatever people might say, the passing of time does not of itself bring healing. No. We need to acknowledge our sin and we need to want to change. There is a good example of this in today's Responsorial Psalm. The psalmist acknowledges his sin and in doing so he experiences God holding him up. He is delighted to experience himself once again in God's presence – something he never wants to lose again.

Acknowledging that we have sinned, however, is not enough. We need the person we have hurt to continue to love us. That is the key to healing and to reconciliation. Such love is unearned. This point is made beautifully in today's First Reading. God is saying to the people in exile: 'Can't you see the new path which I am opening up for you? It is true that you have done nothing to deserve the break. Just accept that I love you and that I want to forgive you. Accept the new life

which I am offering you, for I am the One who loves you.’ Love is never earned. It is a mystery and a miracle. It is the radiant warmth of God himself – so of course we find it healing.

This is the fundamental meaning of the word ‘forgive’. It means to give and to keep giving, to *for-give*. If you hurt me and I say it doesn’t matter, but I withdraw my love from you, you know you are not forgiven. If I hurt you and you keep on loving me, I am not automatically forgiven – certainly not if I abuse your love or take you for granted and keep on hurting you. But you are giving me the chance to be healed. Your giving of yourself to me offers me the key out of the prison that my sin has created. When this offer of forgiveness is without conditions and without reserve it is a tremendous gift of love. Hopefully I will respond, repent of my behaviour and we will experience a deep reconciliation and peace – fruits of renewed love.

We can choose to remain paralysed. We can give in to the fear of freedom, the fear of what might be involved if we have to begin walking again. We can deny God’s love and refuse to accept it. But we cannot cause God to stop loving us. This is the good news preached by Jesus and demonstrated in this scene where the love of God penetrates to the deepest recesses of our hidden paralysis.

Julian of Norwich (died 1413) is confident of God’s forgiveness: ‘Full lovingly does our Lord hold us when it seems to us we are nearly forsaken and cast away because of our sin – and deservedly so. Our courteous Lord does not want us to despair even when we fall often and grievously into sin. For our falling does not hinder God from loving us ... Some of us believe that God is all powerful and may do everything; and that he is all wise and can do everything; but as for believing that he is all love and will do everything, there we hold back. In my view nothing hinders God’s lovers more than the failure to understand this. As by his courtesy God forgives our sins when we repent, even so he wills that we should forgive our sin, and so give up our senseless worrying and faithless fear’(Showings ch. 39 and 73).

Our sin does not prevent God offering love. It can prevent us receiving it. We are made for the intimacy of union with God. So it matters that we do not sin. But when we do sin, we must not become so self-focused and so ashamed that we fail to remember the love that poured out for us from the wounded heart of Jesus. Let us give the last word to Paul. In today’s Second Reading, he says a wonderful thing about Jesus. He says that Jesus is the Yes to all that God has ever promised. God promised forgiveness and in the Gospel we see Jesus reassuring the paralysed man and giving him the courage to get moving again. Not all God’s promises can be fulfilled here on earth. To have the strength to live our present moment as lovingly as we can we need to be sustained by the virtue of hope. We need to be able to entrust the future into God’s loving care. Paul assures us that we can do that, for already we experience Jesus’ Spirit stirring in our hearts. Already we share in Jesus’ prayer and in the intimate loving communion he has with God. This is our assurance that one day, beyond the trials and uncertainties of this life, in communion with Jesus, we will enjoy God’s ultimate promise, when we see God face to face and with purified heart enjoy fullness of life and love in God’s presence.