

11th Sunday of the Year, Year C

The theme of today's readings is forgiveness. Each character in the Gospels represents an aspect of each of our lives. Some part of us can identify with whoever it is who approaches Jesus. Today it is a woman who, we are told, 'had a bad name in the town'. We are not told why, but whatever she was up to, wherever she went she was judged and avoided, and she knew it.

Clearly she loved Jesus. We can surmise that she had heard him speak and had seen how he treated people. He must have awakened in her a hope that she thought had died a long time ago. In any case, she was determined to brave the public scorn and express her love for Jesus in the only way she knew. The others at table did what we are all too prone to do: they judged her by her reputation. Not Jesus. He alone knew her. He saw her love, which, to him, meant, as he said to those at table: 'her sins, her many sins, must have been forgiven or she could not love so much.' Jesus knew that true love, unselfish love, the love that is a gift of oneself, is a communion in the love of God. It can't occur in a heart that has rejected God and locked itself in a life of sin.

This is an amazing, almost an unbelievable, truth. When we sin seriously, we are, thank God, very conscious of what we have done. If we have hurt someone and they won't forgive us, we know what it is like to be locked into our guilt. The amazing truth displayed in today's Gospel, is that God sees things so differently. God so wants us to love, that God readily forgives. Sure, we must learn from what we have done, and do our best not to repeat it, but it is important that we don't become so focused on ourselves that we stop loving.

Saint Paul has a marvellous description of what it is like for us when there is no love in our lives:

'I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate ... I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. When I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members ... With my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin' (Romans 7:14-25).

The only way out of this tangle is to find love. The woman found it in Jesus, and Luke is telling the story in the hope that those reading it (including ourselves) may look to Jesus to learn what God is really like and how readily God forgives. Ultimately, forgiveness can come only through communion with God, something which we experience in a special way here at Mass. As we hear Jesus say when we offer the wine for consecration: 'This is my blood poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins.' The ordinary sins of daily life, provided we are truly sorry for them, are forgiven by the love Jesus offers us in this communion. 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).

If we have committed serious sin, the Church offers us another sacrament, the Sacrament of Reconciliation, through which Jesus reaches deep into our darkness to heal us, to reconcile us with the community that we have hurt by our sin, and to share his peace with us.

We know what it is to forgive another person and to be forgiven by them. We know also what it is like to be not ready to be forgiven or to offer forgiveness. Real forgiveness happens only when the person who is offended continues to give him or her self in love to the person who caused the offence, and when the person who caused the offence knows that the person whom he or 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.

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 to offence may be feeling terrible and want love restored. But we all know from our personal experience that forgiveness is not possible without a real willingness to change behaviour.

We know that forgiveness is only real when there is a mutual giving of self in love to the other. We see this in today's Gospel between the woman and Jesus.

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.

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 wounded heart 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; at least we 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.

We can imagine the feelings of profound communion that welled up in the woman's heart when Jesus responded so beautifully to her offer of love. God loves you and me no less.