

24th Sunday, Year A

Today's readings focus on the theme of forgiveness. From our own life experience we know how important forgiveness is. 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. Forgiveness is always a surprise. We can never earn it, and when it comes it is always so healing and refreshing. It protects us against despair and utter loneliness and encourages us to keep hoping. It reassures us that wherever we have been and whatever we have done we really can still love and be loved.

If I have hurt you seriously, we both know that, however important it can be to come to understand what has happened, something more than understanding is needed if we are to be reconciled. Sometimes people say that the secret is to bury the past and forget the hurt. Where forgiveness is refused we might have to try to do that, but we will never really succeed and however 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 want to change. But more than anything else we need the person we have hurt to graciously continue to love us. That is the key to healing and to reconciliation. Such love is unearned. But so is all love. 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 'for-give'. 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.

God knows we are not innocent. God knows we are made of dust. God knows we will never make it unless God is constant in love for us, never holding back forgiveness. At the beginning of his Gospel Luke has Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, looking forward to the birth of the Messiah. The birth of his son is like the first glimmer of light in the eastern sky. Zechariah knows that the rising sun is soon to shed its light in our dark and sinful world. In his canticle of praise, he sings of God's compassionate love. He knows that God's people are about to experience salvation, an experience which is immediately linked by Luke with the forgiveness of sin (Luke 1:76-79).

When Matthew comes to recount that beautiful moment in Jesus' life when he is having his final meal with his friends, he portrays Jesus offering the blood-red wine to them, while speaking of the blood of the covenant which he is about to pour out in love for the world 'for the forgiveness of sin'(Matthew 26:28).

When John describes Jesus' presence among his disciples after the resurrection, he remembers Jesus offering them his peace as he called them to carry on his mission. To make this possible he 'breathed into them and said: Receive the Holy Spirit. Forgive sin and it is forgiven'(John 20:21-23).

When Paul speaks of the freedom which is ours in Jesus he identifies it as 'the forgiveness of sin' (Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14). Forgiveness is a central theme of Jesus' prayer the 'Our Father' (Matthew 6:12 and Luke 11:4), and Mark, who does not give us this prayer, still has Jesus say: 'When you stand in prayer, forgive anything you have against anyone' (Mark 11:25).

The English mystic, Julian of Norwich (died 1413), a contemporary of Chaucer and the first woman writer of our language, 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 his servants to despair even when they fall often and grievously into sin. For our falling does not hinder him from loving us' ('Showings', 39).

'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' 73).

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 acknowledgment of our sin humble us to look upon the one we have pierced and allow him to continue to forgive us, continue to give himself for us. We may then learn from our failures, learn that we are utterly dependent upon God's love, and learn that his great love is without end.

Years ago I had an experience which has etched this on my imagination. I was chaplain at a university and was setting up a house in which I was going to live along with a community of students. The house was pretty run down and had been left in rather a mess by those who had been renting before us. I especially remember the shade on the standing lamp in the lounge room. It was filthy and seemed beyond being able to be cleaned. One evening, having failed to find a replacement shade, I arrived home, walked into the lounge and there, to my amazement, was the shade allowing a gentle light into the room. The woman who owned the house was also an artist. The irremovable black stains were still on the shade, but she had touched them up so that they were now the centres of daisies. The black marks, with a little touch of green here and violet there had been transformed into garden paths. What a wonderful image this is of forgiven sin.

It is Peter who asks the question about forgiveness in today's gospel (Matthew 18:21). Everyone knows how he persistently denied Jesus. This was not something he could undo or pretend away. The fact of his sin was something he could never forget. It would remain a black stain till the day he died. But when Jesus looked across to him with loving forgiveness in his eyes, Peter's heart was moved and he wept bitterly. When this same loving Jesus gave him the opportunity, three times, to declare his love (John 21:15-17), Jesus was healing Peter's soul and transforming the pain into the beauty of a garden. The sin was still there, but now, bathed in love, it was the centre for the flowers of humility and compassion.

If forgiveness can be such a wonderful grace for us, how can we refuse to offer it to others? Offering it may demand of us what it demanded of Jesus. A heart of flesh is easy to pierce. Blood and tears may well flow. But we owe it to others to continue to love them unconditionally. Did not the Jesus who forgives us plead with us to 'love one another as I have loved you'? And love in the real world always means forgiveness, for none of us is innocent.

I shall leave you with an extraordinary witness to forgiveness. The following note was discovered in 1945 pinned to the clothes of a child killed in the concentration camp of Ravensbruck: 'O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all of the suffering they have inflicted upon us. Instead remember the fruits we have borne because of this suffering – our fellowship, our loyalty to one another, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart that has grown from this trouble When our

persecutors come to be judged by you, let all of these fruits that we have borne be their forgiveness.'

It is God's forgiveness that liberates us to grow in love. If we can only allow ourselves to be moved by grace and our hearts to become the heart of Jesus, we will find that by forgiving others we are liberated from so much of the hurt that they have caused us. We are also offering those who have hurt us an opportunity to live again. Some hurts do radically alter relationships. We cannot pretend that this is not the case. We have to face the reality of this. Nothing is gained by pretense. But there is no need for a hurt to choke off our love. No one can stop you loving. Jesus died because of the way people treated him. There is no going back on that. But he could still pray: 'Father forgive them'. His heart was pierced but remained pure, and the love that he gave to the end continues as a stream of grace poured out over our hurting world. As his disciples, let us commit ourselves to be like him in this. When we eat his broken body this morning and when we take the chalice to our lips, this is the commitment we are making.