

Church of the Good Shepherd
and
St. John the Evangelist

4 Lent
March 18, 2007
Fr Bill McGinty

“As We Forgive Those...”

Our 10 o'clock service today is a healing service. Traditionally, we like to have at least one healing service in Lent. For in Lent we are asked to reflect on our lives and put things right which have gone wrong. Jesus is visiting the house of one of his disciples; the evening meal is being served out doors under the canopy behind the house. Everyone has gathered and the scribes and Pharisees have come to listen to Jesus, but they are distracted by the presence of Jews who work for the Romans as tax collectors and others who they regard as sinners.

Jesus turns aside to address the grumbling of the Pharisees and he begins to tell them the story of the Prodigal Son.

Their story is unique and arrives like a thunderbolt to confound the Pharisees and the Scribes. Although it is a simple parable with a religious message for everyone to understand about love and forgiveness; that is not the message that Jesus intends for the Pharisees and Scribes. He wants to put them in their place and this story is perhaps the biggest put-down in history. In real terms what Jesus tells the Pharisees is as follows:

“You Scribes and Pharisees believe that you understand the scriptures better than anyone else and that you are so perfect in keeping the laws of Moses that you will be the first to be saved. You also believe that everyone who you judge to be a sinner will be condemned to everlasting damnation. I am here to tell you that you could not be more wrong.”

I am here to tell you that the badge of true love is not duty it is forgiveness. If it was not so, no one could be saved for all our sinners. You think because you obey the letter of the law that it makes you better than everyone else but it is not so. Our relationship with God begins with humility. The Prodigal Son learns humility because the pigs are treated better than he, but he does learn and it is as a humble servant that he returns to his father. Yet, you Scribes and Pharisees have never learnt humility, because you believe that you have earned your place in salvation. Do you not know that forgiveness is a free gift that the Father bestows on each one of us? It cannot be earned, but it is a gift with a condition. The condition is that we forgive in return. You Pharisees do not seem to think you can do that. You condemn the sinner and exalt yourselves. In doing so you steal from God his freedom to bestow his forgiveness on whoever he wishes. Do you not realize that when you do this you condemn yourself and you lose the thing you sought to gain, salvation itself.”

Thinking on this Gospel and the words of Jesus this week, gave me much pause for thought. I wondered who we in the story identify with the most.

We can identify with the Prodigal Son, but if we do we have ourselves to become humble and never again ever judge anyone. If we think we are like the elder brother, then we have

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to learn to forgive and forget. If we believe that we are like the forgiving Father then we have to become enormously patient and forgiving.

However, if we see that we are closest to the Pharisees and Scribes, who hear the story first hand from Jesus, then we are in lots of trouble.

First, because we believe that we are basically better than everyone else and deserve God's salvation. Secondly, that we believe we have the only handle on scripture and that our interpretation is the one that counts.

Jesus tells us in this parable that we cannot be like that. As Christians we cannot afford to fall into the trap of believing that we are better than anyone else. Better because the Bible belongs to us, or because we believe we are somehow entitled. The story Jesus tells is an alternate way of looking at both scripture and at salvation. In Jesus' story salvation is not about jumping through hoops or conforming to the proscribed laws, salvation is about inheriting the Spirit of God.

It is a lesson that the Pharisees consistently do not understand. With God's forgiveness comes healing and that healing is administered by the Holy Spirit. Being forgiven and healed, opens our life. It is a transformation, a spiritual Resurrection if you like. The Early Christians both understood and believed in this transformation. They saw it over and over in people who were once closed to Jesus and his word.

Paul speaks of this transformation in the 2nd reading: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see everything has become new."

To mark this change newly baptized Christians wore white clothes and took a new name. No longer could they indulge in their old ways for now their lives had to be lived in Christ as an example to all.

At times this notion of accepting all and forgiving all, tests us to the limit. Just when we think we have it down, something will happen that forces us to take one step backwards and withdraw forgiveness altogether. It may be as stark as a TV news broadcast about the abduction or slaying of a child, immediately, even our most Christian thought become compromised.

Some of you recently may have watched a television movie on HBO called "*Longford*". It is the story of Lord Longford a British Politician belonging to the House of Lords, who in the 1970's became involved with prison reform. He was concerned that prison should rehabilitate the offender and send them back as a productive member of society. He further believed that all prisoners should have the eventual hope of parole and release, even the worst of them.

Longford's views collided headlong with the media and the public when in the late 70's he took up the case of Myra Hindley. Hindley had been imprisoned since 1964 just after the

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death penalty had been abolished in the UK. She and her boyfriend Ian Brady had lured small children to their house on the outskirts of Manchester and tortured and murdered them. They buried the bodies high up on the Yorkshire Moors a bleak foggy no-mans land. Hence their crimes were known as the Moor's murders. At their trial tape recordings of the last moments of the children's lives were played back as evidence to public and jury. They were convicted of six murders, but their crimes could well have been many more.

Lord Longford campaigned that Myra Hindley had been rehabilitated, become a Christian and deserved to be paroled. He stated that everyone was entitled to forgiveness. The public disagreed.

In 1980 my college professor asked me to contact Lord Longford and invite him to speak at our Thursday afternoon seminar at Heythrop College, London. Being naïve as to how you contact Lords of the Realm, I looked him up in the phone book and rang his number at the House of Lords.

He, to my surprise, answered the phone and agreed to a date, and in due course arrived to speak. An obviously good man, he had strong religious beliefs which touched all his values and how he saw life. Longford, could not see himself as any better than Hindley or any more deserving of God's love and forgiveness. The State did not agree with him however, and Myra Hindley served out the remainder of her life in prison, dying in 2002, thirty eight years after her conviction.

The forgiveness business is a tough business to get into. It poses us tough questions, such as "did Christ die for Myra Hindley?" Our Christian faith teaches us that he did, no matter how unpalatable that might be.

As we reflect on this parable today, let us try to look back on our own lives and see the people who need our forgiveness and healing. Let us take on the role of the forgiving Father and stand at the end of the driveway of our life and see who limbs into our line of vision, who we have never yet forgiven.

Whether they are alive or dead, the forgiveness that is ours to give has a rebound effect, because it always bestows on us grace. We are never, never ever, as close to Christ or as Christ-like, as when we forgive.

Forgive in Jesus' name and we open ourselves to God Spirit, and it is God's Spirit that truly transforms us and makes us ready and welcome into the Kingdom of God.

It is the message of Lent. It is the hope of Easter. It is the true spirit of our salvation. It is the love of the cross, won for us by a dying loving Jesus Christ.

Amen+

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