

Forgiveness frees people from bondage

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Easter 2 – John 20:19-23

If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.

A friend of mine had been badly mistreated – betrayed really – betrayed by a person who should have been trustworthy and caring – one who claims a Christian faith, but who'd acted like a vicious bully. My friend didn't want to retaliate, but spoke instead about having a duty to forgive.

When you're in a place of injury and fear, it's a terrible burden to think you have to forgive. It means that on one side of you, you have an unrepentant bully, and on the other, a God who apparently, without caring if you're safe or not, demands that you simply forgive the bully. Did Jesus give us forgiveness to make us vulnerable to abuse? I can't claim to have a clear statement about this, but today's gospel helps us to explore this question.

Jesus' friends had closed themselves away in a safe place together. They feared for their safety – the same people who persecuted their master might well start on them now. They didn't feel it was safe for them to be out in the community – they were cut off. So like the friend I was talking about, security for them lay in a closed door – a barrier between them and dangerous enemies.

Into this situation, the risen Jesus came and stood among them. He gave them a blessing of peace, and then showed them the wounds of his crucifixion. And we're told that at this, the disciples rejoiced.

Some commentators have read this to mean that the disciples felt sudden relief that Jesus wasn't angry with them – angry with them for having denied him or deserted him. But the gospel doesn't tell us that. It says that they were frightened of Jesus' persecutors; not of him. They rejoiced at seeing him again – disarming the power of their fear. It happens when Jesus comes, gives them his blessing of peace, and shows them the marks of his suffering and death.

With those marks, Jesus showed them that he knew what their fear and grief felt like – and because of the gospel, we know that he understands *our* fears and griefs too. In this, I find forgiveness; but what does this forgiveness consist in? Is this an inflexible demand that people remember their duty, or is this a setting free?

And is this greeting of peace offered to oppressors – to bullies – or to their frightened victims? When I read the Hebrew Scriptures, I hear the prophets telling oppressors that God's heart is for the poor and downtrodden. In today's gospel, I see that heart revealed most perfectly.

Forgiveness does not turn a blind eye to wrongs. But it sets us free from their power. So it calls us back from isolation into community; it meets our woundedness not with power, but with wounds of its own; it meets our fear with compassion, our turmoil with peace. What a gift; what a lovely gift.

In our Judeo-Christian tradition, it's understood that a disciple learns the faith and receives the gifts of God in the expectation that they/we will hand them on. This is made explicit in today's gospel.

Jesus repeats his greeting of peace to his disciples, and then says that *as God has sent him, so he sends them*. The second greeting of peace at this point – directly connected with the sending saying – tells me that the peace Jesus has brought them from God is the peace that they, and now we, are meant to

hand on.

Jesus then gives them that peace tangibly by breathing on them – giving them the Holy Spirit. This passage is often called John's *Pentecost*. But what else does it make you think of? For me, it evokes the story from Genesis ^(Gen 2.7) where God forms the human being from the dust of the earth, and then breathes into its nostrils the breath of life. Is this the *new life* which raised Jesus from the dead now being breathed into those disciples who had believed themselves in danger of their lives? And again, if what you receive is what you must pass on, is this our mission too?

Obviously it is. It's into this context of life-giving – or life-restoring – breath that the teaching about forgiveness comes. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained. I believe this might well cause us to think of forgiveness more as freeing people from bondage than binding them in obligations – more as a gift to the poor and oppressed than a free reign for bullies – more focused on release from unnatural debt than turning debt into guilt.

But I think I'll leave it there with questions left hanging, because we should talk about this together at some length; not just take things as read. Amen