Forgiveness is a joy; not a burden

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Kids: Aslan breathing on the petrified Narnians and restoring them to life.

Easter 2A –John 20 19-23

Jn 20.23: If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.

I remember speaking with someone who'd been badly mistreated–betrayed really–betrayed by a person who should have been trustworthy and caring–a person who claims a Christian faith, but who acted like a vicious bully. My friend didn't want to retaliate and 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 an obligation to forgive. If means you have an unrepentant bully on one side of you, and on the other, a God who, apparently without regard for your safety, demands that you simply forgive the bully. Did Jesus give us forgiveness to be a burdensome duty? Today's gospel helps us to explore this question in a helpful way.

Today we meet Jesus' friends locked in a safe place together. They feared for their safety. The same people who persecuted their teacher might well start on them now. They didn't feel safe to go out in the community–they were cut off. Security for them was a locked door–a barrier between them and dangerous enemies. The risen Jesus came to them in this situation, and stood among them. He gave them a blessing of peace, and then showed them the wounds of his crucifixion. At this, the disciples rejoiced. Then he repeated his gift of

peace, and sent them into mission.

John says they were frightened of Jesus' persecutors. [v. 19] So is this sudden joy they feel a freeing from that fear? What did the sight of the living Lord, and the sight of his wounds do for them? [v. 20] In showing them his wounds, Jesus showed them two things. Firstly, that he knew what their fear and grief felt like. And thanks to the gospel, *we* know he understands *our* fears and griefs too. Secondly, he showed them that the danger they feared does not have the last word; it is overcome.

It's in his two gifts of understanding and release that I find Jesus' forgiveness. This forgiveness is not expressed as a demand that we remember our duty to forgive. It's a liberation; a setting free. Jesus sends us to offer *his* understanding and *his* release to people. But we have a choice—to forgive or retain that release. [v. 23]

We see Jesus' greeting of peace offered to frightened, vulnerable people. But what about the people they're frightened of?

On Good Friday, we heard that Jesus died for us while we were yet enemies. So that means that the bullies and the powerful are to hear the message too. In the Hebrew Scriptures, I hear the prophets telling such people that God's heart is for the poor and downtrodden. And in today's Gospel, I see Jesus offering peace and freedom through his experience of being downtrodden. What does a bully make of that? What does a dictator make of that? What do we do with this?

Forgiveness doesn't turn a blind eye to wrongs. It names them and offers a chance to change. It calls wrongdoers back from isolation into community. Forgiveness meets people's woundedness not with power, but with its own wounds. Forgiveness meets fear with compassion, and turmoil with peace. Peace be with you, he says.

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/us*. The second greeting of peace is directly connected with the sending saying. v. 21 So the peace Jesus has brought them from God is the peace that *they* are sent to hand on, and now in our turn, that *we* are sent to hand on; hand on to all who need it—and who we pray can receive this peace. But what is this peace?

Jesus gives it to his disciples tangibly by breathing on them—giving them the Holy Spirit. v. 22 This passage is often called John's *Pentecost*. But what else might it make us 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. In today's Gospel, we see the resurrection life which raised Jesus from the dead being breathed into his disciples. People who had believed they were in danger of their lives went out as he sent them. They passed on his new life and it has come ultimately to us. What we have received is what we must pass on.

It's in this context of life-restoring that Jesus' teaching about forgiveness comes. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained. We are to think of forgiveness more as freeing people from bondage than binding them in obligations—as giving a chance at free, new life; as transforming the hearts of the powerful, so it's a gift to the poor and oppressed. Forgiveness is a joy; not a burden; something we long to do; not a mere duty. As God has sent Jesus so Jesus sends us. May we go freely and joyfully and share his new life. Amen