

14 March 2010
4th Sunday of Lent

The Word

The forgiving father

Lk 15:1-3.11-32

Today's gospel story is known as the parable of the prodigal son. But a more appropriate title for it is the Forgiving Father. For the focus of attention is really on the father's extraordinary forgiveness rather than on the son's selfish behaviour. The father had every right to be angry with his son. He had every right to refuse to accept him back or, at best, to treat him as a paid servant as even the son himself suggests. But the father does none of these things. Instead, he orders the servants to prepare a banquet to celebrate the son's return. He forgives his son totally and unconditionally. It is an extraordinary forgiveness.

Just as the father in this famous parable forgives his wayward son and joyfully welcomes him home, God our Father in heaven forgives us and eagerly welcomes us home when we turn back to him from our sins.

Reflect

Some years ago, *The Corrs* released a single called 'Forgiven not Forgotten.' But we know only too well that we are human and we are frail, and all too often a hurt is neither forgiven nor forgotten. We can find it so hard to forgive.

As Christians, there are three things we can say about forgiveness, three things we can say with absolute certainty. First, we are obliged to forgive. The requirement to forgive is central to the Christian way of life. It is something Jesus emphasised over and over again in his preaching, as we see in today's Gospel, something he practiced in his own life. Remember the story of Zacchaeus, the story of the woman caught in adultery? Remember how he forgave his own killers? "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

The second thing we can say about forgiveness is this: that no matter who we are, or what we have done or how sinful we think we may be, God forgives us first. That is the story of the bible, the story of our salvation - that our God is a loving, forgiving God, who keeps on loving and forgiving us, no matter what. Over and over again in the Old Testament we see God forgiving his people even when they don't deserve it, even when they let him down. And the New Testament tells us that God sent his Son among us to save us by dying on a cross for us, even though we don't deserve it. All free gift, all undeserved by us.

And that must be our motive for forgiving. We are to forgive because God has forgiven us; we are to be merciful because God has been merciful to us. We owe God. It is as simple and as challenging as that.

The third thing we can say about forgiving is that it sets us free. Forgiving sets us free; being forgiven sets us free. We know from experience that holding onto hurts, clinging onto bitterness, being consumed by hatred or anger weighs us down, it burdens us. But letting go of those hurts, seeking forgiveness, offering forgiveness, is liberating. It sets us free, makes us whole again, puts a spring in our step. We become new people. That was the experience of father and son in today's gospel. It speaks of the truly awesome, life changing, power of forgiveness.

Pray

Think of someone you have hurt or offended. Pray for them. Think of someone who has hurt or offended you. Pray that you might forgive them.

Say

“Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me a sinner. Lord Jesus Christ, help me to be as forgiving of others as you are of me. Amen.”

Do

Is there anyone you haven't forgiven? Take one practical step towards forgiving them (for example, trying to understand them, looking at your own unforgiveness).

Learn

- * As Christians, we are obliged to forgive.
- * The story of our salvation is of God's forgiveness of God's people.
- * Forgiveness must be from the heart.

Laetare Sunday

The fourth Sunday of Lent has traditionally been referred to as 'Laetare' ('Rejoice') Sunday from the first word of the entrance antiphon. The Church invites us to refresh ourselves with joy in the midst of our Lenten penance as we look forward to the happiness of Easter. Even though we fix our minds this season on the suffering and death of the Lord, we remember too that the resurrection has already taken place.