

Forgiveness. Homily during the Healing Ministry, St Mary's on 21.7.10

The central theme of the Christian faith is love of God, of neighbour and of ourselves. This is about a desire that we and those we relate to enter into a deeper relationship with God. That desire has three distinct but often inseparable parts: faith, forgiveness and healing. Out of God's overflowing mercy God seeks to restore peace between humanity, creation and God. This may be between communities, between individuals, and within an individual. As human beings we are unwell through guilt, fear, broken relationships, and loneliness. This is where healing ministry comes in.

Today I would like to reflect on some aspects of the key matter of forgiveness, and the challenge of giving or receiving it.

During the often difficult processes of giving and receiving forgiveness there may be times when we have a myriad of thoughts and emotions that we cannot deal with in human strength alone. These are times when the healing ministry can make links between God's immense love and our inadequacy. And with God's help we can find courage, hope and new ways of dealing with difficult situations.

We are all familiar with the central part of the Lord's Prayer - the request for God to forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us - it is a reciprocal matter. And it has just been spoken of in the reading. For most people forgiveness is not easy. When a person is hurt then anger may rightly follow. And if forgiveness is offered prematurely or at a superficial level, wounds may simply get buried. In such situations those who are hurt may shrink from further contact with the person who has hurt them. A period of separation may be helpful before forgiveness can even be contemplated by the victim, or before the offender can raise the courage to ask for it, and later to accept it. Relationships may be severely disrupted or ended, but separation, even if permanent, does not necessarily mean that forgiveness cannot eventually happen.

There are often situations in which the victim seeks justice. Once punishment is complete, relationships may be restored. This is an important part of Mosaic law. However, the Christian view, expressed in the Sermon on the Mount, and elsewhere, is that victims are to take the penalty upon themselves; to turn the other cheek; to love their enemies; to pray for their persecutors; to forgive seventy times seven.

Forgiveness is not a matter simply of feeling forgiving. It is an attitude, a desire to release the other person from penalty so that the other person is able to go free, or to start a new, different and more mature relationship with the person who has been hurt. Two approaches that the church has traditionally followed to help this process is for us to express our penitence corporately during worship, and the usually more demanding rite of reconciliation, or confession on a one-to-one basis. In both cases God's forgiveness is then offered, through its ministers, to those who truly and earnestly seek forgiveness.

Many people do find that it is harder to receive God's forgiveness for their own sins than to forgive others who have done wrong to them.

Real forgiveness is never easy. Firstly, there has to be clear recognition that forgiveness is called for. Secondly, resolution to forgive fully is vital. Thirdly, the one who forgives may very well also need forgiveness in this or another context. Fourthly, a real willingness to start a new relationship with the person who has caused wrong is essential. Such a process needs the greatest possible openness and honesty: exaggeration, pretence, and insincere diminution have no place here. Only then can an offender know what blame is theirs, and also what positive steps may be taken. It is good if the person who is doing the forgiving can come to accept that the wrong done causes a change in their own situation as well. This can lead to reshaping life in new terms. The old good has gone and will not return. A new good must be built. This may be easy, but it may call for much generosity and love. How? At least by not expecting quick change. A long time may be needed. It also means recognising the truth that he or she is the kind of person who could be responsible for the wrong that has been done.

Sometimes forgiveness is challenged long after an event when memories of the event recur, with the resurgence of negative feelings, not only to the perpetrator, but to situations and people who remind them of the original problem.

Nevertheless, many people find that they are unable to bring themselves to offer forgiveness to other people who have caused hurt and suffering, even after a long time. The sin continues to be retained. If forgiveness cannot be offered then a great personal burden is borne. I am sure that this is not what God intends. Equally, there are many people who have a deep desire to be forgiven for their wrongdoing – and are indescribably hurt because that forgiveness is withheld. Because forgiveness is retained, they cannot move on.

In Luke 15.21 the Prodigal Son says "Father I have sinned against heaven and before you: I am no longer worthy to be called your son." No, and he never will be worthy, but he has faced up to the consequences of his actions and he will be welcomed with love and joy nevertheless. This is a wonderful example of the way God is.

The eventual achievement of forgiveness can be recognised by the fact that events which previously caused emotional distress when recalled no longer have the power to trap one in turmoil through past memories and attitudes. They no longer restrict one's ability to get on happily with life. Such freedom is very precious indeed, and worth waiting for. That freedom is a sign in part of the great effort many people put into forgiving and being forgiven. It is also a profound sign of the healing gift borne through the Holy Spirit and coming from the infinite forgiveness and mercy of our God of love.

As we move now to the ministry of healing maybe you would like to bring before God the need for forgiveness in any situation involving yourself or someone you know. Perhaps you first need to ask for God's help to let you forgive yourself for being imperfect and human. Let us ask with hope that God will transform whatever the situation may be so that you or others may be granted forgiveness and the freedom to lead a new life.

Amen.

