

Sunday 8 June 2008: The Third Sunday after Trinity

The Forgiveness of Sins

Readings: Romans 4:13-end; Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

As part of Discovery Day at St. Martin-in-the-Fields a few weeks ago during the reading of sacred texts an Imam, Abduljalil Sajid, read to us from the Koran on the theme of mercy and we heard a prayer sung by Sami Yusuf. The Imam told us that he used to chant this prayer with his father when he was young. The words were very powerful:

Oh my Lord,
My sins are like the highest mountain
My good deeds are very few
They're like a small pebble

I turn to you my heart full of shame,
My eyes full of tears
Bestow your forgiveness and mercy
Upon me

Yes Allah
Send your peace and blessings
On the final Prophet
And his family
And Companions
And All who follow him.

I was struck by this image: my sins like the highest mountain and good deeds so few like a small pebble... turning and reaching towards a God so great a God who can bestow forgiveness and mercy. We don't talk about sin much any more. Perhaps we link sin with an unhealthy repressive church where its members are kept in ignorance, fear and guilt and prevented from developing a mature and integrated personhood. In our present society it is more common to portray ourselves as the victims – the ones sinned against, not as the sinners.

The distrusted perpetrators and villains are often presented as somewhere out there threatening our security: they could be the Prime Minister, the government, the health service, the education service, the police, the criminal, the gang, the paedophile, the rapist, the murderer, the thug, the foreigner, the asylum seeker, the dictator, the corrupt government, the Mugabe, but not us. Perhaps it's something to do with a success driven society which makes people so dismissive of the concept of personal sin. I was struck by this when watching an episode of *The Apprentice* where each contestant claimed any success as their own and blamed any failure on the others with total ruthlessness and disregard for loyalty or truthfulness. If these really are the qualities of a good apprentice, God help the business world. How far this is from the beauty of the prayer for forgiveness with which I began.

A recognition of our own personal sinfulness has always been part of our Christian faith – it is the prayer of Jesus himself: “forgive us our sins as we forgive others.” It is the Jesus prayer – one of the oldest pilgrim prayers of Christendom beginning with the tax collector's cry for mercy: “Lord Jesus Christ son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.” Thomas á Kempis in the *Imitation of Christ*, written in the 15th century, puts it starkly:

Remember that you are a sinner, entangled and enchained by many passions. Of yourself, you always tend to nothing; you quickly fail and are overcome; you are soon disturbed and overthrown. You have nothing of which to boast, but many things of which to be ashamed... Let nothing you have achieved seem of great importance... save that which is everlasting.”

One of the places I learnt this lesson was in Santiago de Compostela. Santiago, in Northern Spain is the third most popular place for Christian pilgrimage, (Jerusalem and Rome being the first and second). It is the place where legend tells the apostle St. James' body was finally buried after his beheading in Jerusalem, and only discovered through a dream of a hermit nearly eight hundred years later. This pilgrimage to Santiago became for many pilgrims a profession of faith, with the belief that those who made the pilgrimage would receive complete forgiveness and absolution for all their sins. I made this pilgrimage in September 2001 soon after the international trauma of 9/11. It seemed the right thing to be doing at that time when we all felt so powerless, in that lull after the fall of the twin towers before USA and the UK hit back in revenge. In that moment of lull a greater justice and peace for a moment seemed possible, if only we could have broken these cycles of revenge. It was not to be.

Yes it seemed good to be walking for forgiveness, in the hope that something better was possible – meeting people from so many different nations along the way. Thomas Merton wrote that it is in ourselves that we also meet and must begin to heal the sins of the world. So I too was walking for forgiveness for me and for those I loved. Walking, as those who join the Canterbury pilgrimage know, brings healing. You can walk things into place. The burdens you carry move from head to heart and out through your legs and feet each step of the way. After several days of walking you begin to feel physically tired but also lighter and freer. You begin to realise that more is less, the less you carry the lighter you are and the more you are awake to the moment. You are no longer the centre of things but moving through the world – alive to the creation around you and the people you meet. Forgiveness of course is the most healing thing of all: healing your mind, your heart, your body of its own accord. We walk our lives into perspective and proportion, letting go every step of the way and moving on. Everyone I met on that pilgrimage was part of that rite of passage; the honeymoon couple on the bunk above me with their laughter and joy, the student from Brazil who had just finished study, the elderly couple beginning their retirement by walking to Santiago, the man changing jobs and facing life choices, the widow facing the grief of her husband's death, and then Patrick from America. I met Patrick on the road and for more than three weeks we walked together.

Patrick said he hated the church and wanted nothing more to do with God. But slowly over the pilgrimage he began to join the pilgrim masses at first hanging on the outside but gradually becoming more part of them. And as we walked he began to question me, hundreds of questions about the Christian faith, about the nature of suffering and the nature of God. Across the endless northern plains of Spain he questioned me like the devil's advocate, with jokes and laughter and the slow honest disclosure of his reason for walking, a painfully broken relationship, where he felt he had failed and the woman he loved had left him. As we reached Santiago after more than 570 miles of walking he told me with a laugh that at least when he got to Santiago his sins would be forgiven. It happened that for the last three days of our journey two Irish Catholic priests joined us. Patrick the anti-cleric thought this was a particularly amusing irony – that his companions on the road should end up being three priests when he had come in search of a woman. One of the Catholic priests told him that if he really wanted to be forgiven he would still have to go to a priest in Santiago for absolution. On reaching Santiago we went to the pilgrims' mass together. Patrick was complaining bitterly “You know what I've walked all this way to be forgiven and I've been tricked by

God and the Church again because I am not going to tell my sins to any priest for absolution.” I left Patrick to begin my journey back home but half way down the road I realised I had left my walking stick behind at the place where Patrick was staying. As I walked back to find it I felt the somehow the pilgrimage was unfinished. Patrick was still there. I said to him: “Patrick over the last four weeks you have shared with me everything about your life. It is the most honest open, fullest confession of a life I ever heard and I just know that if God is love as we have been told you are completely forgiven. Look I’m a priest can I give you absolution. Patrick said that that is what he wanted most in the world to be forgiven. It was a moment I will never forget as though through Patrick I too had been able to experience something of God’s forgiveness. I later heard from Patrick that this pilgrimage was indeed a time for him of real change and transformation. How much we all need the healing of forgiveness.

Recognising our sin feels as if it will be a shameful thing, but it is actually there that we meet God and find that it has become the means of grace, truth and freedom. The place of judgement has become the place of hope and love.

This journey to forgiveness and grace is really at the heart of the Christian life. We are called to follow and behold “the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” – more than takes away, takes upon himself all that we are ashamed of, soaks up our sinfulness himself, meets us there, and whose love for us in sin becomes the transformation. In our Gospel today we hear the story and the expression of that promise. Matthew, the despised tax collector for the hated oppressor, the collaborator – siphoning off, and profiting from others’ misery; Matthew, the slime of his society, becomes the very one chosen and called to be friend and host. And that is the very meaning of Christ’s redemption: making new life begin, and begin again and again at the very place and point where that new life seemed most impossible. Jesus says “Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick. Go and learn what it means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice’, for I have come not to the righteous but sinners.” Jesus, once more, turning upside down expectations and reversing roles, so that the sinner becomes the revelation and witness of his unconditional love.

The Hebrew scriptures call this love of God “hesed” and in English we have tried to translate it in many ways: “steadfast love, loyalty, loving kindness, mercy, or faithful love. I was reminded of the nature of this relationship of love during the weddings held at St. Martin’s last weekend. I was struck once again by what an incredibly wonderful promise it is that the bride and groom make to each other and as a single person felt a wonder and my own slight envy and longing. To see two people with obvious truth professing such love I found deeply moving:

To have and to hold
From this day forward
For better for worse
For richer for poorer
In sickness and in health
To love and to cherish
Till death us do part

And then I realised that this is the very love we are all promised and have been given, though of course we often do not recognise it – a love given unconditionally for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, richer or poorer, beyond expectation and deserving, beyond anything we earned or could have done: the God who meets us even in the shame of our sin – to love and to cherish, and even death won’t divide us.