

THE PROBABILITY OF FORGIVENESS

IF YOU were dead and entombed and, suddenly, alive again, what would be your first words to your family and friends? As much as you might want to imagine it, only a few, that we know of ever, had the experience: a man named Lazarus from Bethany, north slope of the Mount of Olives; a young man, un-named from the town of Nain, about five miles southeast of another little village called Nazareth in the Galilee; and another un-named, but very young lady, a child, whose father was the synagogue elder from Capernaum, a coastal town on the Sea of Galilee. There were others – also unnamed, but all associated in one way or another with the man named Jesus or his followers as they scattered around the Mediterranean world. There was Dorcas the seamstress from the suburbs of Joppa whom Peter brought back to life after her grieving lady friends told him how much they missed her; there was Eutychus, who fell three floors out the window ledge he fell asleep on, in Troas, while not staying awake for one of Paul’s sermons...the apostle, perhaps bringing the lad back to life as an apology for having put him to sleep in the first place. Whatever any of the ‘once dead’ had to say has not found its way into the record. But as for Jesus, his first words *are* remembered. Appropriate, since all of the others would know death again, but Jesus would not. *His* was a resurrection forever, which is, no doubt, why his first words were worth remembering.

They were spoken in a familiar setting, the upper room of a house in Jerusalem, to a familiar audience, the closest of his followers who were in hiding for fear of being taken, as was he, tried and, likewise executed. The words have at one and the same time a surprising aspect and a resonance, that, upon reflection give them a quality such that no other words would be appropriate. *Peace be with you. Forgive sins.*

In what must be seen as a single train of thought, the language completes the concept that was almost, if not the last, that came from his lips before death stilled them. *Father, forgive them.*

But, an event of such power and implication transpires between those phrases that they stand as the expression and embodiment of everything that Jesus represented in his life-before-death, and, then, his life-after-death.

The summation of his mission from his Father God, spotlighted in the excited proclamation of John at the Jordan, when the Risen One first came on the scene.-- *There is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.*— became the prime directive for all who would follow in his steps through this world to the next. No...that’s not quite right. We do *not*, in our faith, ‘follow the leader.’ It is more precise to say ‘all who walk his *very* steps, with him,’ who share his life so intimately that, as he would say: *Who hears you, hears me, and Him who sent me.*

And it all revolves around forgiveness.

It wasn’t as though this was a concept that came up only at the end, so that the words from

the cross were remarkable in being a *new* thought. They were remarkable because it became obvious that what he had taught, frequently, would be what he lived and died by, not the mere platitudes that many get by on, like the inside of Hallmark cards...pretty words, betrayed so often by deeds. In one of the influential texts of our age, H.Marshall McLuhan (the brilliant literary scholar and virtual godfather of the study of the media and the science of communications – and also a Catholic gentleman) took its title from the observation that words alone communicate nothing. *The Medium is the Massage*. *

One of the Twelve, the core group of Jesus' many disciples, Matthew the Levite, would, in a very few years, compose a document in the everyday dialect of Galilee, Aramaic, that would be the first effort to put the ideas of the Master into print. Unfortunately, Aramaic documents didn't have wide circulation in the Roman world, and, although we know it existed, we have no copies of it. But, there is a credible theory that it survives in another text as part of a Gospel written by someone who used Matthew's name but not his Aramaic...rather good, widely spoken and read, Greek. We have given a name to the section of the Matthew Gospel where Jesus' teachings are assembled like the catechism they were meant to be. We call it the *Sermon on the Mount*. And there it is, so very early on in the record:

Blest are the merciful, they shall have mercy shown them.[Mt 5:7]

You have learnt how it was said to our ancestors: You must not kill; and anyone who is angry with his brother will answer for it before the court; if a man calls his brother "Fool" he will answer for it before the Sanhedrin (the Supreme Court); and if a man calls him "Renegade" he will answer for it in hell fire. So then, if you are bringing your offering to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering before the altar, go and be reconciled with your brother first, and then come back and present your offering. [Mt 5:21-26]

You have learnt how it was said : Eye for eye and tooth for tooth. But I say this to you: offer the wicked man no resistance. On the contrary, if anyone hits you on the right cheek, offer him the other as well; if a man takes you to law and would have your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. [Mt 5:39-42]

You have learnt how it was said: You must love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say this to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. [Mt 5: 43-44]

If you forgive others their failings, your heavenly Father will forgive you yours; but if you do not forgive others, your Father will not forgive your failings either. [Mt 6 14-15]

And, at the end of such beautiful but impossible idealism, just so everyone knew he was serious and not merely platitudinous, he added: *Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a sensible man who built his house on rock....and if not, he will be like a stupid man who built his house on sand.* [Mt 7:24-27]

The reaction, at the end of the compendium, was equally noteworthy. The people didn't walk

away shaking their heads. The record is given: *His teaching made a deep impression on the people, because he taught them with authority, and not as did their own scribes.* [Mt 7:24-25]

The Greek Matthew would add to that bare record of the Aramaic Matthew an epic of miracles, cures, teaching, and a naming and sending the Twelve on an internship to repeat his message to others. The Baptist would be executed for his stubborn witness to such powerful truths.

The gathering storm of opposition and resolve to end the Master's ministry would be obvious to anyone with eyes to see. Always there seems to have been the sense that, at any given time, God could be called upon to bolster the arguments with a smiting or two. But he never was summoned. Nor did the Master seem to counter, with threats or even name calling, those who were so transparent in their hatred and desire for his blood. In time, there would be condemnatory language. *Hypocrites, blind guides, whitewashed tombs...*and the lowest of all charges: *lawyers!* But the anger that brought forth the charges was righteous and spoke the truth. It would take 16 centuries before the playwright of Stratford would urge the capital solution in Dick the Butcher's immortal line from Henry VI: *The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers.*

It very well may have been the very absence of any hint of vengeful anger that brings Peter, at long last, to put the case: *Look, if my brother wrongs me, how often must I forgive him? Seven times?* [Mt 18:21] Peter has been doing some homework and it is not difficult to imagine that, though he said "if" he meant "when"...it's inevitable. It's the human condition. When my brother wrongs me. The impression Jesus made early on, must have been sitting there taking on flesh day by day as Jesus did *not* call for a *jihad* against those who stood against him. Late in Jewish thought, truly inspired after centuries of war, conquest, oppression, exile and slavery, came the language of an earlier Jesus – (remember, Jesus is just the Greek for the Hebrew *Joshua*) – Jesus ben Sirach, around 200 years before Jesus Ben Joseph:

*Resentment and anger, these are foul things too,
and both are found with the sinner.
He who exacts vengeance will experience the vengeance of the Lord,
who keeps strict account of sin.
Forgive your neighbor the hurt he does you,
and when you pray, your sins will be forgiven.
If a man nurses anger against another,
can he then demand compassion from the Lord?
Showing no pity for a man like himself,
can he then plead for his own sins?
Remember the last things, and stop hating,
remember dissolution and death, and live by the commandments.
Remember the commandments and do not bear your neighbor ill-will;
Remember the covenant of the Most High, and overlook the offence.*

[Ecclesiasticus 28:1-9]

Beautiful. But not a preparation for what Jesus would do with the question. *Not seven. Seventy-seven.* [Sometimes 'seven-times-seven...the translation doesn't matter. We get the idea.]

Do not hold any record of it. Forget about it.

Jesus, at that point, teaches Peter and all of us ever since, that the measure is not to be made according to legal statute, but according to a deeper reference. He answers with a story, a parable...a wicked servant who owed much, was forgiven much; forgave not even a little and was handed over to torture and loss of everything. And then the injunction that rang like an out of tune bell: *That is how my heavenly Father will deal with you unless you each forgive your brother from your heart.* [Mt 18: 23-35]

The motivation is all that changes. Jesus Ben Sirach wants us to remember the last things. Do you want to die unforgiving and risk, yourself, being unforgiven? For Jesus Ben Joseph, it will be a question of *being perfect, as your Father is perfect.* [Mt 5:48]

And that is exactly where the beauty of forgiveness from a cross *or* fresh from a tomb takes on the flesh that must become our own and find harmony in the soul.

Sure, Jesus can speak of forgiveness, and even mean it. But he's God. God is expected to act that way. In fact, if he doesn't, as the psalmist states, we are beyond hope..[130:1-4].

*From the depths I call upon you, Lord,
listen to my cry for help!
If you never overlooked our sins, Lord,
could any one of us survive?
But you do forgive us:
and for this we revere you.*

Here we stand, beneficiaries of boundless forgiveness and holding in our baptisms the commission to forgive fresh from the tomb. We ignore the monumental nature of this calling at our peril.

One way we have avoided it is to clericalize the text. It is in the Gospel given by the Church of Ephesus, the community of the Disciple Jesus Loved, John: [20:21-23]

*As the Father sent me,
so I am sending you.
Receive the Holy Spirit.
For those whose sins you forgive,
they are forgiven;
for those whose sins you retain,
they are retained.*

We want to localize this in a confessional, or ritualize it as an event with a priest and a penitent. It is certainly that, but not that alone. In much the same way that the Christening ritual of the baptismal ceremony is part of, but not the complete substance of, a life-time of being configured to Christ, of being 'Christ-ened'....or as the wedding ceremony is part of, but not the complete substance of, the union of husband and wife, better-worse, richer-poorer, in sickness-in health until death contains the fullness of Marriage

The commission is the same for Christ and for his Church. It is all part of the Father's will. It falls into the substance of our mystical membership in Jesus...his Body....acting through Him, with Him, in Him. And, like Him, it will often come with what amounts to nails driven in my flesh by the evil done to me, personally, even by those I loved. It will be only in the dimension of forgiveness we are empowered to bring forth, *outside* of the ritual of the Sacramental celebration that will give true form and substance to our ritual behavior.

We know how very difficult this is and we invent shortcuts to what we suppose will pass for the real thing. *I'll forgive, but I'll never forget.* What is that supposed to mean?

I put it to you that forgiveness is impossible without forgetting. But I mean something very special by 'forgetting.'

I don't mean amnesia. *Oh, I forgot you raped me. Slipped my mind that you defrauded me of my life savings. Was my reputation destroyed by you years ago?...oh yeah, now I seem to remember.*
How silly.

I don't mean acquittal. *Whatever it was you did, doesn't matter. There is no responsibility, no consequence. It wasn't your fault, really. You had a bad experience when you were young.*

I don't mean a reward. I'm not saying you've earned my forgiveness or that you have made up for what you did in some sense; that you have undone what cannot be undone.

I don't mean approval. I'm not saying *it's OK. That it doesn't really matter.* That it wasn't really serious.

I don't mean acquiescence. I'm not saying *do it again. You got off easy this time, the thing doesn't count.*

(All these concepts are familiar to any who work with the mental health side of forgiveness.)

Forgiveness is not given because one or more of these attributes has come into play. It is given *in spite of* their persistent presence. The past cannot be undone. The pain and betrayal cannot be discounted. But forgiveness can be there...and, if you are, in any sense, no matter of what Faith, 'Christ-ian'...it must be there. Forgiveness happens in spite of, not because of.

Forgiveness is a statement of the soul that, like God, like His Christ, I have decided to put aside what cannot be undone. I will go around it. I will go on from it. I have concluded that the energy it takes me to remember and keep alive the spirit of vengeance or of retribution is too great a price to pay for my peace of mind and heart and soul.

It may begin with pity for the one who needs forgiveness. How pathetic a life to have acted in such a way. How cut off from feeling and from society he or she must be.

It may continue with an unfeeling indifference as to what may or may not ensue in such a life, so pathetically lived.

It may rise to the level of, if only for the sake of others, wishing such hardness of heart might evolve to a level of recognizable humanity.

It may share in the God-like desire that even an enemy, finally repent and be saved from the hell to come.

It may even reveal itself to be “Spirit filled” and to love of the enemy, the doing of good to those who have hated us or harmed us.

And it is at that point that the words of the risen Jesus were accompanied by a gesture that was and is of central importance. He breathed on them. *Receive the spirit*. The word in Hebrew, which he no doubt used, or in Greek, which they used to convey his meaning, it had three nuances. Wind, breath and spirit. Just as the Breath of God in the Old Testament blew back the waters at creation to form dry land and bring forth all living things; just as the powerful *ummmmp* from his nostrils drove back the Red Sea to allow his people, dry shod, be born again in redeemed freedom. Just as the breeze from the dove’s flapping wings moved the air over Jesus at his baptism in the Jordan, so it is the Holy Spirit, alone, that empowers forgiveness in us. For it is the Spirit that makes all things new.

If ever, in our culture of ceaseless, vengeful and greedy litigation, of wars and terrorism that seek to redress grievances hundreds if not thousands of years old, there is ever to be a forgiving heart it will be because

God sent forth his Spirit and renewed the face of the earth. [Ps 104:30]

And, just as God did not await our deserving such forgiveness, but gave it freely and first, as down payment in trust on what we, in return, might find courage to do for each other, our own forgiveness need not await the enemy to crawl over broken glass, begging forgiveness.

The true freedom, like God’s, comes from hearts fashioned as was His Son’s. Forgiving before the asking. There is no record of a voice from the cross questioning...*are you sorry for what you have done to me?* This does not foreclose the need for justice. Laws are broken. Debts to society are due...but we are Children of God, first and foremost, in whom justice and mercy embrace. Vengeance and revenge and what people call ‘cloture’ have little place. Aside from whatever other motives based on power and wealth the establishment of religious courts separate from the king’s court in legal history...it was that such a philosophy of forgiveness *before* the penalty is imposed might find some foothold on the earth.

Ours is certainly a Faith that challenges us on profound and lofty levels of mystery and creed. One God, Three Persons, the God-Man Jesus, the Eucharist, the Church itself. But, the primary foundation of faith is not in argumentation and theological debate. It is now, as it always has been, on the level of acceptance that, for real, God can so change hearts that men truly become not just sons

of God, chips off the old block, but THE Son of God, partaking mystically in His very person, in his love for His Father, in his love for humanity....even when we so desperately need to be forgiven.

It is on that level I elect to trust not in the mere possibility of forgiveness...but in the **probability**. If we see the enterprise only as something “against the odds” – as merely possible or rare – the need for reconciliation on the profound levels of life and death or whatever may be at the core of all we value most, and which has seemingly been dealt a mortal wound, will never find resolution. It may very well be ‘beyond us.’ But if, in faith, in trust, in mystical union with Christ, on the cross, direct from the tomb – if forgiveness is not a ‘done deal,’ let us, at least, place it in the realm of probability. Anything less betrays why Christ was born, why he formed a community about himself, why he suffered and died and rose and broke in non a fear-filled huddle of us in that Upper Room to say, at long last, the words humanity, exiled from Eden, have longed to hear:

Peace be with you. Peace the world cannot give. Peace in Forgiveness, in the Blood that has been shed that the age of sin come finally to an end.

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