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**Fifth Sunday of Easter (Acts 7. 54-60)**

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We have been exploring, this Easter season, how the early Christian community portrayed in the book of the Acts of the Apostles lived in the wake of Jesus' resurrection. What practices characterised their life together? What did they assume must follow *for them*, if Jesus is raised from the dead?

Today, our reading takes us to the central resurrection practice, the heart of Christian life. We call it 'forgiveness'. It's a practice so simple and yet so seemingly impossible at times, that all these centuries later we experience it as an invitation to something both life-giving and profoundly confronting. It's something we resist although ultimately we experience it as liberation. It is the heart of Christian life because, as the resurrection shows us, it is the heart of God's life.

How to speak of the resurrection practice of forgiveness is difficult. As James Alison says, it so easily acquires a religious 'patina', a pious overlay which is seriously unhelpful and tends us towards an unattractive mixture of moralism and self-flagellation. So tonight, I want to offer a few remarks about what the resurrection teaches about the nature of forgiveness, and to share with you something of what I am learning in my own journey of forgiving and not yet forgiving those with whom my life's story is painfully intertwined. My hope is that this might contribute to the journeys on which each of you is invited to forgive those who have hurt you and to be forgiven by those you have hurt – so that together we may keep walking towards the light!

In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante offers an extraordinary image of unforgiveness: two enemies are frozen face to face in a block of ice and so locked together for all

eternity. What I find really striking about that image is its suggestion that somehow, unforgiveness binds us to the very person or experience we want nothing to do with. It locks us into unfreedom. And this resonates with the words of the risen Jesus to the disciples in John's gospel when he breathes the Holy Spirit upon them, saying: 'whose sins you forgive they are forgiven, whose sins you retain they are retained'. These words are not easy to interpret, but I wonder if they are just a simple statement of fact – when you forgive someone, they are set free; when you don't forgive someone, they remain stuck – and so do you.

So what does the resurrection have to do with the practice of forgiveness? How does it help? It seems to me that the resurrection reveals both God's freedom from payback, and God's desire to be towards us in ways that bring life. Think about Jesus. The worst that can be done to him by other human beings is done – he is shamed, abandoned, condemned, killed. He is annihilated, made to be nothing – in social and religious and biological terms. And yet in the resurrection stories, there is no payback, no getting even, no reciprocal condemnation. Just peace and friendship, just a determination to set the disciples free – not only from their debt to him, but also from being trapped the very death-dealing, fear-mongering dynamics of human culture that crucified him. Jesus came, he said, 'to bring life in abundance', and that is what he keeps doing, regardless of what is done to him. In our reading tonight, the mark of Stephen being a true witness to the God of Jesus Christ, a true witness from the resurrection, is just that he is able to live out of this same power, this same freedom from payback and this same way of being towards others so as to give life: 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them'. No frozen blocks of ice here – just freedom and the invitation to truer life.

And this suggests, I think, that forgiveness is a theological virtue before it is a moral virtue. Forgiveness belongs to the nature of God, and is integrally related to God's willingness to give God's self away – to create space for others to live. It transcends normal human culture and the ways we secure ourselves and keep

ourselves safe through practices of reciprocity (you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours), and if you don't keep your end of the bargain, well then, there's payback and negative reciprocity, the taking of offence. We become capable of forgiveness insofar as we ourselves start to transcend these normal human dynamics of reciprocity and so share in, participate in the life of God. This is what Jesus means when he says that 'if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?' [ie. doesn't everyone do reciprocity?]. 'But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven' (Matt. 5. 46, 44).

But how do we go about practising this theological virtue – that is practising God's way of being? And what do we do when we are not there yet, when far 'from being perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect', we just want to curse and rage and condemn?

From James Alison, I have learnt two profoundly significant dimensions of the practice of forgiveness. First, it is a practice of letting go. Forgiveness simply means, in the Greek, letting go. That is not easy. When we have been profoundly hurt or wronged, it feels almost impossible to give up our claim against the one who has wronged us. It does involve a kind of dying – a letting go of a part of myself.

We must be careful here. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Abuse currently underway in our country makes clear that those who suffered abuse at the hands of clergy or other church workers were often encouraged to 'forgive' the perpetrators before they had ever been properly heard, to let go their claims and sacrifice their own need for justice and truth-telling for some supposed 'greater good'. And there are many other contexts where exhortations like these are made in the church, in families, in workplaces, in nations. This is not the kind of 'dying to self' that is of God, and it is not part of the practice of forgiveness.

Forgiveness does not mean suppressing the truth or letting go of the cry for justice. The cry is in fact a necessary step. It does mean (ultimately – and this takes time) letting go of having your identity, your life, determined or defined by what has been done to you. It means letting go of your status as a victim, and the rights it gives you to prosecute payback. It means not letting what has been done to you, determine how you will be. It's about freedom. Alison talks about not being 'fascinated' or obsessed by those who have wronged us, but becoming in a certain sense 'indifferent' to them, free simply to get on with life. 'Don't let the bastards get to you', is one way of expressing it.

The second dimension of forgiveness feels slightly 'warmer' – not simply cool indifference and non-attachment, but something more positive. In my experience, we come to this place only by gift and often after a long apprenticeship with letting go. It is the experience of being towards another as the God is towards us. This regard of God has nothing to do with moral value or desert: Jesus teaches that the Father 'makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous' (Matt. 5. 45). Whether we deserve it or not, God's being towards us is always productive of life. Just as God sees us with all our limitations, defendedness and avoidance and lets us be, desires our good and our life, so we (as we learn to participate in God's gaze) see other people, including those who have hurt us, in the same kind of way. Not justified, not perfect – just human and, like me, loved by God.

For myself, I'm not there yet in some of my relationships. But I think I see that ultimately, my capacity to forgive is connected to my willingness to let go of my claim against them – which is a kind of dying. It is connected to my transparency to God's life – which is a kind of trusting, and to my openness to gift – which is a kind of humility. This dying, trusting, receiving is the dynamic of resurrection life – into which, gradually and as generously as we can, we are invited to yield ourselves so

that with the risen Christ, we too may be agents in our world of peace, freedom and new life.