

2nd Sunday of Easter (C) 2016
(Acts 5:12-16 / John 20:19-31)
03.04.2016

This morning we hear Christ's call to forgive. In the passage from John's gospel we are invited to consider today forgiveness is portrayed in terms of unbinding. Thus it is implied that forgiveness brings release. Experience shows us that when a wounded relationship is healed it is each party involved that is led to taste the Spirit's gift of peace and enjoy the freedom of mind and heart that accompanies this gift.

As we reflect on the gospel call to forgive, let us begin by dispelling some of the misconceptions that can abound in regard to the gospel's call to show gracious mercy. The journey into forgiveness and the freedom that results from this itinerary begins with a recognition on our behalf that a failure to forgive keeps us stuck. A refusal to forgive has a debilitating and even a paralyzing effect upon us. It can rob us of that sense of well-being God desires for us and ultimately it can prove to be a self-destructive force in our lives. Until we welcome Christ's call to forgive which begins by accepting His forgiveness in our own regard, with the implication that accompanies this gift – namely, that we reflect His forgiveness to others – then we find ourselves as the Eleven did before the Risen Christ came and stood in their midst and spoke His message of peace into their hearts. We are tense, closed in upon ourselves (like the Eleven, we remain locked behind closed doors, out of fear), we are imprisoned by our hurts and feel threatened by people around us (just as the Eleven felt threatened by those outside the confined space wherein they had taken refuge). When we welcome the Risen Lord who comes to us, a shift takes place deep within us: we begin to taste peace of mind and heart. Welcoming Christ, we enter into a process that leads to true freedom.

The central message of the gospel passage we read today makes it abundantly clear that the mission of the Church is to proclaim mercy and to offer His forgiveness to all. The disciples, who are themselves forgiven, are sent out to proclaim and share with others Christ's forgiving love: *As the Father sent me, so I am sending you Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven.*

In Matthew's gospel – sometimes called *The Gospel of the Church* – it is underlined that forgiveness is at the very heart of the Church's mission. This is emphasised in what Jesus is recorded to have taught in *the Sermon on the Mount*. The point is made in Jesus' teaching therein that there is an inter-dependence between pardon received and forgiveness offered: *If you forgive others their trespasses; your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.* Jesus is shown to have taught His disciples to pray saying: *Father, forgive us as we forgive.* In chapter 8 of Matthew's gospel – in that famous exchange between Peter and Jesus around how often forgiveness should be offered – Jesus is adamant that there is no room for stinginess in sharing God's gift and no excuse for withholding it.

In Luke's gospel – *The Gospel of Prayer, The Gospel of Mercy, The Gospel of Forgiveness* – Jesus' own penultimate prayer asks that those who are persecuting Him be forgiven. On the cross Jesus is depicted as having prayed: *Father forgive them.*

All this to say that there can be no escaping or getting around the centrality of the gospel call to forgive and there can be no denying of the centrality of the mission to proclaim mercy that has been confided to the Church. This mission befalls each one of us today, just as it befalls every member of the Church in every age and generation.

If the call to forgive is central to the gospel, it is also one of the most difficult demands of the

Christian life. Where we often get stuck when it comes to forgiveness (and, let's face it, we frequently do get stuck around this issue) is to think that because we have been told to forgive we can do so. There is no denying that we are asked to forgive, but it is not hidden from us that we cannot do so relying on our own strength alone. There is a very real sense in which it is true to say that forgiveness is always beyond us. We cannot forgive, but God can and will. God has already forgiven us in Christ and He continually forgives each one of us in the here and now of our lives. God's pardoning grace is there for us every time we turn to Him with hope in His mercy. The Lord, who forgives us so generously, invites us to allow His merciful love to traverse our lives so that He can reach out to others through us. Forgiveness is God's gift to us *for-giving*: It is a gift received in order that it may be shared: forgiveness is literally *for giving*.

If we are to enter into the process of forgiveness we must understand what this means and just what it implies. So let's look at the meaning of forgiveness and its implications for us. Before all else, let me insist that forgiveness is a process and one that can take time. We should not underestimate all that is involved and demanded of us in this process and so we must learn to be patient with ourselves as we engage with it.

I once heard forgiveness defined as *pardoning ourselves or someone else without harbouring resentment*. This seems to me to concur what Paul states when he writes: *Do not to hold on to offence*. (I hear that call not to hold on to offence only in terms of offence committed against us, but also in terms of offence committed by us!) To agree with what has just been said does not imply that no wrong was committed when it clearly has been, nor does it underestimate the fact that the ill inflicted, one way or the other, was not hurtful and to be regretted. In other words, forgiveness is not a denial of offence. Experience shows us that it is really hard for us when we are caught in a fraught relationship, and truly want to forgive the person who has offended us, but all we meet with on the other side is a dismissal of any need to talk things through. This dismissal of the reality – certainly our experience of it – is very painful indeed and usually it only aggravates the malaise we feel. Hurts need to be acknowledged and attended to. Denial is never the answer to an ill which is proving to be destructive of a person's well-being

Psychologically speaking, forgiveness allows a person who is hurting to let go of the debilitating effects of a painful memory that haunts their mind and heart. While the memory of the wrong which is the cause of one's suffering may not be totally erased, it can be tamed to the extent that it no longer holds the power to have a destructive impact upon the offended party's behaviours and attitudes. (There is admittedly a combat to be lived in all this, a discipline to be practised to keep our hurt memories under control, pacified and purified.) Maybe we have heard what some people say when they claim: *to forgive is not a healthy thing to do because it as much as constitutes condoning the offender's wrong actions*. We frequently hear this argument advanced here in Northern Ireland when it comes to dealing with issues of the past conflict. We also hear it said in relation to the terrible tragedy of abuse. To claim, in a blanket way like this, that it is not a healthy thing for those who have been hurt to forgive their offender is an error of judgement.

Personally, I found the testimony of one woman that I will share with you in just a moment to provide a very helpful insight in this regard. The woman I will quote is someone whose daughter was brutally murdered. She explained to her listeners: *I evidently wanted to kill my daughter's murderer with my bare hands*. She didn't stop there, however. She went on to explain how, with time, she was led to look at things from a Christian perspective. Here is how she put it: *In both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, whence my beliefs and values come, the God who rises up is a God of mercy and compassion, a God who seeks not to*

punish, destroy, or put us to death, but a God who works unceasingly to help and heal us, rehabilitate and reconcile us, restore us to riches and fullness of life, for which we have been created. This led her to conclude: I have come to the conviction that my best and healthiest option was to forgive.

Alongside this woman's testimony, it seems appropriate to share with you something I once came across in my reading. What I share with you at this point are the insights of a therapist who has worked extensively with victims of serious wrongs committed against them, primarily in the area of abusive relationships. This man explained that in working with these people he found it vital to begin by dispelling the misconceptions which abound around forgiveness and the best way he found of doing this was to reinforce for his clients what forgiveness is not. I find this approach helpful. It is vital to grasp what forgiveness is not. I find that it frees us up to enter into the process of forgiving. Let me try to unpack in my own words what this therapist had to say in his published study. I will try to resume his thought for you. He explained that he came to see that many of his clients were retained by their suffering and impeded from moving into better mental, spiritual and emotional health, because they feared taking the risk of forgiving the one who had hurt them. They had become convinced that to forgive their offender would give this offender even more power over them. Once he came to see what was going on within his clients, the therapist in question found it necessary to stress with the victims he was dealing with that the way of forgiveness he was proposing for their well-being is not mere forgetting and *getting over* the offence endured. He came to see the importance of reassuring his patients that they will often find that hurtful feelings last, but, even with this, they can still seek to forgive and find that granting forgiveness actually empowers them and contributes to their recovery of lost dignity. He stresses that forgiveness is not having all the painful feelings resolved. He underlines that forgiveness is not absolving someone from the responsibility of what he or she has done. So, it is not about condoning wrong-doing. What was done to the offended party was wrong. Once the person who has been offended sees this, he or she is then invited to choose not to let the offence committed against them to negatively impact their life any longer.

Personally, I feel it is important to stress at this point that the on-going forgiveness to which the gospels call us is not about accepting to be continually hurt. There are implications to this. It implies that there is a necessity for us to move out of an abusive relationship or one in which we are constantly being hurt by the other. That may mean staying clear of, or limiting contact with, certain people who have hurt us in order to safeguard our well-being.

I am convinced that it is also vital for us to grasp that forgiveness does not mean a fraught relationship in our lives will always get back to where it was before the wound inflicted which caused us to feel hurt. A relationship may get back to where it was before, but this is a fairly rare occurrence. At best, the relationship may get back to near it was before. This can happen if the offence endured was a minor one. But if the offence committed and endured was a major one it will hardly happen that things will ever get back to where they were before – and it would be unrealistic for us to expect that they ever will.

In both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, the God who is revealed to us, the God we are called to resemble and reflect to others, is a God of mercy and compassion. He is a God who is infinitely patient with His people, even as they continually forget and disappoint Him. When we read the Bible we see how, again and again, the Lord remembers His people; we see how the Lord lifts them up when they fall; He brings them back to themselves and home to Him. Through our reading of the Scriptures, we are also led to recognise how our God is One who is with us as we struggle. During Holy Week we heard a prayer of the Church's liturgy remind us that *although our weaknesses continually betray us, God's mercy constantly restores us to fellowship with Him.*

As we celebrated the Easter event just a week ago, I spoke of what has been referred to by one man as *the present risen-ness of Jesus*. Today I would like to coin another phrase and say that what Easter reveals to us and should lead us to experience, is *the ever present forgiveness of our Risen Lord*.

There are many people – including among us who are gathered here this morning – who carry in their hearts deep hurts from the past. Such hurts from the past can lead us to exhibit patterns of anger and resentment in the present. Often the hurts in question can be traced right back to our childhood. They may well have been inflicted on us by people who were loved and are still cared for by us: parents, educators, siblings, close family friends. Frequently, those who have offended us will have done so unwittingly.

Others among us may have endured a more recent heartbreak, and therefore be feeling the pain all the more acutely. These more recent hurts may have been inflicted upon us by a spouse, a life-partner, an intimate friend... in any case, persons who have been a cause of disappointment to us. Deep pain always surrounds relationships that fall apart, commitments that are broken, actions that stand in contradiction with words pronounced. It is really painful for us to have to recognise that words we trusted to have meant what they said were not matched by the promises they made.

There may be others among us who have been harshly treated, misjudged, falsely accused; there may be yet others still who have been and still are the subject of people's jealousy, envy, spite and ill-will.

All who suffer in any of these kinds of situations can be tempted to hold on to the wounds they feel, whether they be hurts of the distant past or scars of more recent times. In whatever case, we must ask ourselves: what avail is it for us to hold on to hurts received? The answer is clear: none whatsoever! To hold on to the pain associated with wounds inflicted upon us – whether wittingly or unwittingly – only serves to further weaken and debilitate us.

The call addressed to us today is to strive to arrive at freedom of heart, healing and peace. The invitation we heard through the gospel passage read for us this morning was to unbind and, in doing so, to discover that a liberating grace accompanies forgiveness offered. What we experience when we forgive is that we are freed as much as the one we pardon.

The context in which we find ourselves today is that of *Divine Mercy Sunday* and it falls in this *Great Year of Mercy* declared by Francis, Bishop of Rome.

I would like to end by sharing with you some of Pope Francis' words addressed to the young people he hopes to meet in Krakow later this year. I quote: *Jesus came to bring about the Lord's everlasting time of grace. In Jesus, particularly in His Paschal Mystery, we see the deepest meaning of the Jubilee. Jubilee is fully realised when the Church proclaims a Jubilee in the name of Christ. We are all to experience a wonderful time of grace.*

That word *grace* implies freedom of mind and heart: liberation from all that binds us. It is the promise made at the very outset of His ministry when He stood up and spoke, opening the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, in the Synagogue of Nazareth.

We entered into Holy Week this year with me drawing attention to the frequency of the use of the words *untie, untying*, in Luke's Palm Sunday gospel story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. In the words I spoke introducing Holy Week, I formulated the aspiration that we would all come to experience a liberation in our lives as we celebrated the Paschal mystery. On this Octave of Easter, let us engage ourselves to unbind others in the way we have been unbound: to forgive as we have been forgiven, so that we may well and truly be set free. Yes, liberated

to live, as St Augustine puts it, as *free men and free women under grace*.