

Pentecost (A)  
(Acts 2: 1-11 / John 20:19-23)  
04.06.2017

The monastic community entered into church for this Eucharist chanting the Latin Sequence *Veni Sancte Spiritus*. I would like to reflect with you this morning on supplications from that ancient Christian prayer which accord with the message of forgiveness at the heart of today's gospel passage.

The *Veni Sancte Spiritus* has us pray: *Heal our wounds, our strength renew. (...) Wash the stains of our guilt away.*

Our gospel passage shows us that the disciples who were to pass on God's assurance of forgiveness to their brothers and sisters had first of all to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. **Receive**. This is the very first word Jesus speaks to the disciples after having breathed upon them. Let's be clear, when He invites His them to receive, Christ clearly considers His disciples to be more than just a passive receptacles; He invites them to engage themselves with Him in His mission; He invites them to become channels of His forgiving love.

The same call addressed to the first disciples is addressed to us as well. Intended recipients of a gift may welcome or reject it; they may share it with others or fail to do so.

Reception of the gift of the Holy Spirit – shown by today's gospel to be a gift of forgiveness – carries with it a responsibility. We can either accept to pass the gift of forgiveness on – and thus be blessed and a source of blessing – or else we can refuse to give what we are called to offer in God's name. The choice before us is a clear-cut one. We can either follow through on the logic of forgiveness and see it as *for giving* or we can retain it, hold it back.

The latter option is not without consequences for our own well-being. Experience shows that we can harm our health when we opt hold on to hurt. To refuse to forgive can affect us adversely at every level of our being.

It is surely significant the *Jesus **breathed** upon the disciples* and the others gathered in the Upper Room. Jesus' gesture recalls to us the story of creation, does it not? You will remember from the Genesis account how God is depicted as having breathed His own breath of life into Adam, thereby giving human beings their special dignity. God's very own breath of life breathes within us!

The Risen Lord's gesture shows us that the Spirit given to the disciples and, by extension, to us, is God's creative, life-giving Spirit, while the words Jesus speaks to accompany His gesture indicate that the Spirit given is furthermore His life-restoring, life-renewing Spirit.

*Whosoever receives the divine breath Jesus offers into them becomes alive unto God.*  
Whosoever receives the divine breath ... We who receive the divine breath ...

As a result of our reception of the Holy Spirit, we are enabled to share the gift of God's own life with those around us. Giving something of ourselves to others, we share God's own life with them. This is especially true when we offer forgiveness to those who have sinned against us, since the forgiveness we offer always comes from beyond us; it always comes from God. Those men who said in the gospel story of the healing of the paralytic *God alone can forgive sins* were right. When we forgive, it is God who forgives in and through us. Pardoning love is such a precious gift. It is the greatest gift has to offer us.

Given what has been said so far, I believe we would all do well to ask ourselves this simple question: just how receptive are we to God's own life that has been given to us and which is continually being breathed into us?

Remember. The breath Jesus breathed on the disciples – and continues to breathe on us – is not only God's life-giving, creative, breath, but also His life-renewing, forgiving, breath. Just as the disciples had to receive the Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of others' sins, so we are called today to open our hearts to receive the same gift for the same mission.

Of course, before forgiving others, we must first recognise our own need to be forgiven. If we have not acknowledged our own need for forgiveness – and opened our hearts to welcome this gift for ourselves – we should hardly be surprised to find ourselves struggling to fulfil the Lord's command to forgive those who have sinned against us. How can we give what we have not got? How can we allow God's forgiveness to flow through us if we have not yet received it for ourselves?

Forgiveness of our own offences and the willingness to forgive others theirs are brought together by our Saviour in the prayer He taught us. Jesus has us pray: *Father, forgive us as we forgive.*

These words from the *Our Father* make it clear to us that forgiveness is not meant to be a one way street. There is no way any of us can accept only to be a giver of pardon or only to be a recipient of forgiveness. We must be open both to receive and to give – at the very least we must aspire to forgiveness, want to forgive.

That being said, it is important for us to understand and accept that we might not encounter coming back to us from the other the pardon we offer them. Even when there is no reciprocity, we are called nonetheless to pardon, for pardon is always freely given.

Very evidently we should never block forgiveness from flowing through us, for, as the word manifests, it is *for giving!*

It is both in the giving and the reception of pardon that healing takes place. When forgiveness is mutual, both parties experience a wonderful exchange of grace.

The effects of forgiveness are inclined to make themselves felt within us. Giving and receiving forgiveness creates peace and harmony in our hearts. It restores the sense of well-being we forfeit when we withhold our pardon from another or refuse to receive theirs in our regard.

Refusals to pardon hold us in the ill of bitter spite and that always works to our detriment. Refusals of forgiveness – either way – tend to further infect and poison our already wounded hearts. The psalmist speaks out of experience when he talks of his wounds having become *foul and festering, the result of his own folly.*

Our own experience may have revealed this to us already. If not, we only have to look around us to see how true it is. Just think of the wounds of the past which still hold so many people bound and paralysed in this land. There are those who are unable, at least unwilling, to move forward into the bright new future which is within our grasp if only we accept to no longer stand face to face in opposition, but choose instead to stand side by side in compassion and walk hand in hand with a sense of solidarity.

Understand me. I am not minimising the ill-effects of hurts received. I am not denying the ill-effects we can all feel when another has offended us. The pain we endure can be long lasting. What another has done to us can sometimes leave us scarred for life.

But, even so, I would insist that as long as we allow ourselves to get entirely stuck, bogged

down, in our hurts – as long as we totally fusion with our wounds – then this is simply not good for us.

If we are not careful we can become accomplices to the wrong done to us – we can become perpetrators of violence against ourselves by prolonging the ill-effects of hurts received. We can all so easily fall into this trap. We have to be reminded constantly that we don't ever cure a harm received by giving ourselves licence either to hit back or to do ourselves further self-harm by incessantly ruminating the wrong done to us.

There is no denying that refusals to forgive debilitate us.

In contrasts, an inner movement towards those who have sinned against us, at least to desire that we would be enabled to forgive our offender has a profoundly healing effect upon us. It calms our anger, it sweetens our bitterness, it liberates us from the desire for revenge. In forgiving we find that all those negative attitudes that we have harboured in our hearts, allowing them to cripple us, no longer have a hold upon us.

To engage ourselves to forgive our offenders helps us reclaim our human dignity, for it restores within us our likeness to God who created us.

Our Creator God spoken of in the Book of Genesis is the same forgiving God whom Jesus revealed in the Upper Room.

Jesus led His disciples to understand forgiveness to be nothing less than a re-creation when He breathed upon them.

Christ restored to His disciples the dignity they had lost by their betrayals of Him in His Passion.

When they saw the Risen Christ standing there before them – still visibly scarred by the wounds of His passion – we can imagine that the disciples must have reeled within. They would have been acutely aware of their sin, conscious of their heavy weight of guilt and shame as they recalled how they had abandoned the Master when He most needed them.

This is where I see that other line I retained from the *Veni Sancte Spiritus* come in. *Wash our stain of guilt away.*

If we are healed through forgiveness – both through forgiveness offered and forgiveness received – we are also washed clean by the grace of pardon.

Forgiveness plunges us afresh into the waters of our spiritual regeneration – the waters of baptism.

We could say that through forgiveness what we come to experience is nothing less than a grace of re-creation.

The waters of forgiveness which cleanse us from sin become waters of rebirth for those who are immersed therein.

In the gospel passage read at the Solemn Vigil of Pentecost last night the image of water was central. The text taken at the Vigil was that passage from earlier on in John's gospel (Chapter 7) where we see Jesus in the temple for the festival and hear Him speak words along these lines: *From the breast of anyone who comes to me will flow streams of living water.*

Thinking of water associated with forgiveness, I am led to recall the living water that gently trickled from Christ's open side Himself upon the cross. The early Church saw this stream of water as the fulfilment of the vision recorded in Ezekiel's prophecy in which a river was seen to flow forth from the right side of the temple.

It is in all the great tides of Living Water of which the Scriptures speak that we are invited to

immerse ourselves today. Yes, all the tides... including that which flowed from Christ's side as He hung upon the cross and that which is evoked in John's later vision of the River of Life in the Book of the Apocalypse.

The call addressed to us this morning is a call to allow ourselves to be both cleansed and healed in the living waters of God's grace – cleansed and healed of all the ill-effects the wounds of sin have inflicted upon us.

May the Spirit who brings us healing and who cleanses our hearts be with us as we pray along the lines evoked by the prayer formula with which I conclude this morning's reflection.

Let us pray these words charged with holy hope and ardent longing.

*Bathe us in your cleansing rivers.  
Soak us in your healing waters.  
Drench us in your powerful downfalls.  
Cool us in your bracing baths.  
Refresh us in your sparkling streams.  
Master us in your mighty seas.  
Calm us in your quiet pools.*

*Veni Sancte Spiritus!*

*Heal our wounds, our strength renew.  
Wash the stains of guilt away.*

Amen!