

THIS WEEK'S HOMILY FROM FATHER JIM

Fourth Sunday of Lent: *True forgiveness is a decision to 'let go';*

1st Reading: Joshua 5: 9-12: *The Hebrews' escape is complete;*

2nd Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:17-21: *Reconciliation in Jesus is a fresh start;*

Gospel: Luke 15:1-3,11-32 : *The parable of the prodigal Son.*

Later this Spring, it will be 77 years since the end of World War II, and with it, the closure of the Nazi concentration camps. Very few of the camp staff are now alive, but quite a lot of the younger inmates still survive. People have often asked if 'forgiveness' and 'reconciliation' are possible between ex-staff and camp survivors. Some survivors say they can "forgive" them; others say they never could. But what do 'forgiveness' & 'reconciliation' mean here?

Those with no religious belief think that the idea of a 'god' forgiving our sins, on the condition that we 'forgive' each other, is meaningless. They may believe in 'burying the hatchet', reconciliation of former enemies, and so on, but cannot accept religious "forgiveness". They may have heard some Catholics say that, in Confession, God makes it as if the offence never happened and 'wipes the slate clean'. I hope I don't shock you by saying that I think they have a point. Take the ghastly business of child abuse (not to mention the war in Ukraine). The popular Catholic idea that by Confession (or good act of sorrow) every sin is 'washed away' and the person feels restored to the state before the sin was committed, is now seen to be sometimes unworkable. This is especially true where the sin involves the person going through a psychological barrier from which they cannot return – eg, an adult preying on children, rather than protecting them; armed soldiers & airmen targeting helpless civilians in a war situation, etc. In both cases (even if the military are "only obeying orders"), everyone must (or should) know it is very wrong, and can't be undone. In the last war, the SS had to condition / brainwash any pity out of the camp guards.

So, is 'forgiveness' possible? Yes, it is, because it is not a feeling, but an act of the will – a decision made by us and God. Please read the Prodigal Son parable. If you do, this interpretation of it may shock you: the boy was a selfish twit at the start of the story, in the middle of it, and (even) at the end of it. His attitude to the father was disgraceful – wanting his share of the estate before the father's death was tantamount to wishing he were dead already. (To lighten up a bit, you may have heard of the explanation a pupil once gave in an RE exam: "The prodigal son was the young man who took his father's money; he spent most of it on naughty women and gambling, then wasted the rest..."). Having lost the money, he knew he had to go home, and so he cynically rehearsed what he would say to the father, to get back in his good books. When he approached the house, he began to recite the rehearsed words, even though the father had run to meet him. He hadn't changed. He never actually said "sorry".

The parable is about the father's mercy. He was delighted the lad had returned; he "forgave" him the hurt he had caused. But what he did NOT do was pretend that nothing had happened. The elder son complained that the father had "killed the fatted calf," when "this son of yours came back after swallowing up your property – he and his women". The father responded by saying: "You are with me always, and all I have is yours. We had to rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found." The father's love for the young son had never wavered; he was glad to have him back, but it was not as if he had never left. The elder lad, who had been loyal, would inherit the property; he would stay close to the father. The prodigal was safe and back home, but the damage he'd caused could not be ignored: its effects would remain. Anything else would have been an injustice.

In most cases, when we seek 'forgiveness' from God, we are asking to be taken back by his love, with regret for we've done, plus a promise to try to avoid that in future. But sometimes, it's not so simple. Imagine a family dispute: a woman accuses her sister (falsely) of adultery; the sister's marriage fails; the family are divided - some for the sister, some against. As long as that lie is in circulation, and believed, the damage continues. The one who told it may later feel awful, and have sense of guilt, but to say to her: "Just go to Confession and all will be OK" is not a full answer: it would make an adult injury seem like a childish event. The wronged sister could decide to forgive the other, to let go of the burden of dislike and rancour; this would relieve her mind. However, for any true reconciliation, the lying one must admit that what she said was wrong.

The parable shows what sorrow, forgiveness and reconciliation mean. Sorrow is turning back to God and regretting what we've done wrong. The son's motive for going back was basically selfish – fear and hunger – but he went; he didn't wait to be collected! That was enough for the love-filled father. He was forgiven: this was an act of the will by the father – more than just an emotional response. But the forgiveness did not mean the effects of the son's actions were ignored – they had to be lived-with. When we turn to God after major sin, he forgives us; we are reconciled. But the clock can't be turned back: we usually have to live with the human consequences of what we've done.

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