

FORGIVENESS - FROM WHAT?

Evensong 14th September 2008

Today is Holy Cross Day and Trinity 17. Holy Cross day has been celebrated since the fourth century. St Helena (Mother of Emperor Constantine) went to search outside Jerusalem and believed she had found the true cross. The cross became the universal symbol of Christianity, replacing the fish that had identified the earliest Christians. After the discovery, St. Helena and her son, Emperor Constantine erected a magnificent basilica over the Holy Sepulchre. This basilica was later destroyed by the invading Arab forces in the 7th century, But a portion of the True Cross was said to remain Jerusalem enclosed in a silver reliquary.

Paul in I Corinthians:

²²Jews want miracles for proof, and Greeks look for wisdom. ²³As for us, we proclaim the crucified Christ, a message that is offensive to the Jews and nonsense to the Gentiles; ²⁴but for those whom God has called, both Jews and Gentiles, this message is Christ, who is the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For what seems to be God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and what seems to be God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

We are now so accustomed to the cross as a symbol of our faith that it comes as a huge shock to think of it in the same terms as an executioner's axe, a guillotine, the electric chair, a lethal injection. In fact, it is even worse than that, since those methods were (or are) relatively swift. The lingering death of the cross was prolonged torture. To wear a cross should be a daily reminder of what God did for us, the extent of God's love and forgiveness. And may we consider how to respond to such love.

Now, in addition to Holy Cross day, it is Trinity 17, and the theme for that is forgiveness. The themes are very closely interwoven. Forgiveness is not natural to us, is it? Because it is so foreign to human

nature, people find it very difficult to forgive others. Yet nothing so characterizes the new nature of Christians as forgiveness, because nothing so characterizes the nature of their Lord. Jesus' most striking and humanly incomprehensible words from the cross of torture were, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing"

Forgiveness reflects the highest human virtue, because it so clearly reflects the character of God. A person who forgives is a person who copies the godly character. Nothing demonstrates God's love so much as His forgiveness.

But what **is it** that *God* has to forgive? He created us with free will, so in his wisdom he must have known that we would misuse it. The picture of the perfect sinless state of man in the garden of Eden is, for me, just that. A picture. Perhaps it is more a picture of what men and women we created **for** - our goal to walk freely with God, in eternity. The heading on the passage in Genesis in the NRSV is "The First Sin and its Punishment."

This is a story, set down in writing and perhaps brought up to date, during the Exile, about two people, a man and a woman, and what happened to them. Although they are necessarily pictured as the *first* man and woman, they are symbols as well as ancestors of the human race: behind the statements that 'This is what happened' the author is saying 'This is how human beings behave, and these are the consequences that follow.' The eating of the fruit is not a single event of the remote past, but something that is repeated again and again in human history. The traditional view that it was the first sin that caused all later generations to be born in 'original sin' is not borne out by this story, although it has a useful purpose of explaining the present conditions of human existence. It teaches that God's intention for human beings is wholly good, but that they can be led astray by subtle temptations; and that, while disobedience to God, putting self before God, may bring greater self-knowledge, it leads to disaster: the intimate relationship with God is broken. Life then becomes harsh and unpleasant; however, God does not entirely abandon his creatures but makes special provisions for their preservation.

An Israel that had suffered devastation and exile from its land could hardly fail to get the message.

It is perhaps unfortunate for the Christian church that Augustine, in his attempts to confound Pelagius, majored on Genesis 3 and Romans 5, and developed the idea of Original Sin. 'As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive'. The church has wrestled with this long and hard. Augustine's teaching was upheld (albeit with some modification) by the Council of Trent. Adam's sin was held to be passed down through procreation - and of course Psalm 51 "and in sin did my mother conceive me" reinforced this. We ended up in the church a very warped and unhealthy view of sex.

The doctrine didn't die. Listen to Luther, for example:

It is also taught among us that since the fall of Adam all men who are born according to the course of nature are conceived and born in sin. That is, all men are full of evil lust and inclinations from their mothers' wombs and are unable by nature to have true fear of God and true faith in God. Moreover, this inborn sickness and hereditary sin is truly sin and condemns to the eternal wrath of God all those who are not born again through Baptism and the Holy Spirit. Rejected in this connection are the Pelagians and others who deny that original sin is sin, for they hold that natural man is made righteous by his own powers, thus disparaging the sufferings and merit of Christ

One of the problems with developing this doctrine arises from taking a literal view of Genesis and the Creation. If, like me, you hold that Adam and Eve are **illustrative** people for the sake of the imagery of the story, then I cannot take seriously the idea that humans are born under divine punishment from the off, and that an unbaptised child will not see glory.

So I have to ask myself again: what **is it** that God had to forgive? What is so awful that the only answer was the cross? Well, I am going out on a limb here. I may be going right off track - but here goes. God didn't want us all to be nice little animals that did things automatically - praise

him because we were built to praise. That sort of thing. God created us with the ability to be autonomous - and that involved risk - on His part. Giving us an ability to choose meant that we could decide not to do what he really wanted us to do.

Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever. So says the Westminster confession of Faith. So we fail when we turn from God to doing our own thing. As Jesus reminded us, and we repeat often in the Eucharists - the two principal commandments are to Love God with all our being and to love our neighbour as ourselves. We do our own thing principally because we are designed to be selfish. Look after Number One was an early coping and survival method - the selfish gene. Perhaps *that* is original sin - although some would argue about that. We are cleansed from sin through the waters of baptism where we say "I turn to Christ, I repent of my sin, I renounce evil".

We cannot, of our own efforts, restore ourselves in God's sight - all our righteous deeds are like filthy rags. Forgiveness is only effective and ratified through the cross. That is where true forgiveness lies. It is on the cross that Jesus draws all of us to God. In some way which we can never fully understand, in this horrific death and then the glorious resurrection, we can be brought back to God. We are made one with him.

The church fathers wrestled with the cross, which was clearly the climax of Jesus' ministry. It was the crux of salvation, but what did it mean? Just HOW did it work? And over the years various pictures emerged.

The most frequent one grew out of the Old Testament scriptures, and the doctrine of sacrifice for sin. And so we get the spotless lamb of the Old Testament becoming the Lamb of God, and we have the hymn which says: There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin. But who was he paying it to? Was a vengeful God murdering his own son for us? That does not seem to me to be the picture of God that Jesus gave us.

Then again, many people say that Jesus died for us - for you, for me. They mean perhaps that he stood in and took the punishment that we should have to face. And that it was divine love that somehow short circuited divine justice.

Various other pictures emerge in the New Testament . Hebrews lays great stress on the whole sacrificial regime of the Old Testament being superseded by the new. Jesus the great High Priest, both priest and victim, does away with the need for any future blood sacrifices.

So, what Jesus does on the cross and how exactly it works are frankly very difficult to understand. But the plain fact is very simple. And totally amazing. Phil 2. our second reading this evening summarizes of this amazing story.

Hear it in a different translation:

You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross. Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honour and gave him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Son of Man, Son of God. Representative human, yet divine. Not just a cure, like the serpent in the wilderness, saving people's lives... but promising *eternal* life: that the world might be saved through him; be brought back into the loving relationship with a holy God for which we were created. Jesus has been called the divine physician - he heals our sin.

That is why we can call the cross “holy”, or as the familiar hymn puts it: wondrous. We sing that we *survey* the wondrous cross. We look at it as the people in the wilderness looked at the bronze serpent to be healed. Look at the cross. There is huge pain here. But there is also huge love. There is divine mystery and power to change the world.