

“To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you” — [C.S. Lewis, The Weight of Glory](#). I want you to keep this comment in the back of your mind while we develop further the background behind the readings for today.

The Gospel for today comes from the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew, and deals with the stated claim of the church, as the successor to Christ, to be able to pronounce absolution and forgiveness of sin. Here the reading tells of a group of people, presumably friends, who bring a paralyzed man to Jesus, seeking a cure for his paralysis. Jesus responds with the statement, “Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee”. We might consider this to be an odd response, given that there is no indication of a direct admission of sins, nor any expression of repentance or desire for forgiveness. What most people would probably see here is a situation where an individual seeks a cure for a physical ailment. Yet Christ offers a very specific expression of forgiveness without an immediate physical cure. Why is this?

The answer lies in understanding that the Jews of Christ’s time considered sickness to be a sign or result of sinful activity on the part of the individual involved. In line with their focus on physical compliance with the Law, those who led sin-less lives were blessed with physical health, while those who were sick were assumed to have committed sins for which they were being punished. The principle was that physical health proceeded from spiritual health, and spiritual health proceeded from compliance with Judaic Law.

So it was of major concern to the scribes surrounding Jesus that His healing process was started by addressing something other than Judaic Law to accomplish a physical healing. But what was of even more concern, indeed blasphemous in their minds, was that Jesus emphatically said that **HE** could forgive sins, and do so without the traditional sacrifices required by the Law. This is the one instance in the Gospels where our Lord unequivocally claimed what every Jew considered to be the prerogative of God alone; namely, the power to forgive sins. Having said it, Jesus proceeded to prove it by curing the individual of his paralysis, and sending him on his way.

Jesus raised the sin question because the final purpose of his coming was to deal with it. The root problem of the human race was sin. Sin was the issue, and in the time of Christ the Jewish religious establishment had developed an extensive system of laws, rules, and regulations for dealing with it. Sin was a big deal. How different from today! Today we tend to do any of three things when it comes to sin: 1) we ignore sin, as if it does not exist; 2) we blame it on someone else, our genes, our upbringing, our environment – anyone or anything except ourselves; or 3) we pretend that it does not matter. But sin does matter! It is the source of all our problems. Sin cannot be escaped or ignored; it is part of our nature as fallen successors of Adam and Eve. Jesus knew this, and wanted to draw attention to it.

So after pronouncing forgiveness on the paralyzed man, Jesus healed his paralysis. Seeing the miracle, the people understood that God had given Jesus some astonishing authority; indeed, His as-yet-unspoken claim to deity had been established. But Matthew points out more than this. Christ’s focus was on dealing with sin; forgiveness of sin through repentance and renewal rather than compliance with the law was His goal. Such reconciliation was the purpose of Christ’s presence on earth.

The directions that this homily could take at this point are so huge and multifaceted as to boggle the mind. In the desire to cut down these possibilities to a manageable level, let me focus on just two specifics that happen to be mentioned in the Propers readings for today. I’m going to phrase them in the form of questions, questions that I commonly get from people who are seriously looking for answers to them. And let me add from the onset that the answers I propose are qualified answers; they include caveats as the questions are such that there is no black & white nicely packaged answer that can be used to address them.

The first question comes from the Gospel reading: does the forgiveness of sin lead to physical healing or good health? Put in a more personal fashion, if I confess my sins and obtain God’s forgiveness, will it heal the physical illness I am afflicted with? And I thought I was reducing the scope of this homily to a manageable piece! Forgiveness certainly seemed to lead to physical healing in the Gospel reading, though not immediately. People facing severe health problems raise their voice in prayer and supplication for divine healing, and in most cases not receiving the immediate response they have so earnestly prayed for, want to know why. Have they not been repentant enough? Have they not been forgiven by God? Does divine forgiveness equate to physical health? The answer is “yes”; forgiveness does lead to healing and good health, but in the ultimate sense, not necessarily the immediate sense. All who are saved from sin by Jesus will one day be delivered from all physical manifestations of sin. Our resurrected bodies will be perfected and free of sin’s effects. But the answer is “no”, if what we mean is the right of believers to have perfect health now. We cannot expect to claim our resurrected body now, simply because it has been paid for by Christ’s atonement. Our resurrection bodies come to us, according to the New Testament, only when Christ returns on the Day of Judgment; God has not committed to it any earlier than that. He may bestow healing immediately, and there is nothing in Scripture that prohibits requesting it, but He has certainly not pledged himself to do so. But one day, all true believers will be perfectly healed.

The second question comes from a paraphrasing of the concluding sentence of today’s Epistle reading – if forgiveness of sins is a divine prerogative, are we as humans expected or even capable of doing what is stated in the Lord’s Prayer, “to forgive those who trespass against us”? “To err is human; to forgive is divine” is a saying we have all heard. In today’s reality, the one thing we are probably most prone **not** to do other than requesting forgiveness of our sins, is to offer forgiveness to others who have wronged us. The desire for revenge is indeed a carnal desire.

To approach this question, first we must consider forgiveness in the context of who is being asked to do the forgiving. Divine forgiveness requires a divine forgiver; in this sense, the forgiveness of sins is a divine act. It means a restoration, a re-creation. The God who creates man out of nothing, restores man out of the nothingness of our sins. He re-establishes us in righteousness. The vehicle of this restoration is the incarnation of Christ. The restoration is accomplished in His Passion and Death. Forgiveness is not a superficial gesture on the part of God; it comes from the heart and love of God, from His heart into our hearts. It concerns not simply the penalties or the consequences of sin, but sin itself and the will of God that we not commit it.

We as humans are also expected to forgive; it is a stated imperative in the prayer that our Lord taught us. Our human forgiveness does not carry the weight or importance of divine forgiveness, but we, as individuals created in God’s likeness, are expected to emulate God’s actions. And that means that we must offer complete forgiveness to people who sin against us. That is very tough to do! You or I or anyone else can say to someone, “*I forgive your sin*”; we can say it, but what is the act of forgiving in us? If you say, “*I forgive you, but I can’t forget*”, then you haven’t forgiven the sin. You have merely put away the penalty that you might have exacted, your pound of flesh, as it were. The original wrong hasn’t been made right; it isn’t forgiven. If you despise the one who has offended you so that it is a matter of repugnance or indifference to have anything further to do with him or her, then you haven’t forgiven; you are only trying to forget, to erase that person from your universe. If you say, “*I will forgive, because if I don’t, God won’t forgive me*”, you come a little closer to true forgiveness, but you are still not there. At least the common basis of our joint sinful humanity has been recognized and acknowledged, if begrudgingly.

Forgiveness cannot be mere words, sounds signifying nothing. The forgiveness of sins from the heart is a deeper and more profound reality. It is a mirroring in us of the Divine Love that has created us and which restores us. Divine forgiveness creates our forgiveness. It takes away all our sins and offences by the transforming power of that active love that Christ displayed on the Cross, the love that led him to say at the moment of his dying, “*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do*”. Forgiveness is one of the great distinctives of the Christian faith. What can it mean in the face of conflict and war, in the face of enmity and hatred that surrounds us on all sides? It means everything, my friends! It means an openness to the transcendent love of God without which our lives remain prisoner to our passions. Returning to the quotation I started this homily with, “To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you”. God has made us capable of forgiving others, and He expects us to do so – and not just in word, but in deed.

As we come to the Eucharistic feast today, let us make a resolution. Let us resolve that as we are about to uniquely experience the love of God in His forgiveness of our sins, we will go forth from this place with a sincere effort to emulate that love and forgiveness in our interaction with others. Let the peace and reconciliation that ultimately comes from God through divine forgiveness direct and rule our hearts and minds as we strive to transfer that forgiveness into our everyday lives. ***Amen.***