

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Apr 27th 2014

The good news is too good – too good to be believed. We have to tone it down. The good news is too simple – it cannot be right; we have to complicate it.

Today has been designated “Divine Mercy Sunday.” It’s worth exploring what that means. In today’s gospel Jesus tells His disciples “As the Father has sent Me, so I also send you.” Sent to do what? Simply to tell everyone (and to show by how He lived) that God forgives, and that God’s people should act accordingly. God has forgiven. Has forgiven. Can that be true?

We soften this by saying: “Sure, God will forgive. Get your act together and ask God’s forgiveness, and God will forgive.” It’s up to us to take the first step. But that’s not what the gospels proclaim. God always takes the first step. Recall Luke’s story of the woman who, at a dinner party, washed Jesus’ feet with her tears (Luke 7:36–50). As Jesus explains her action to His discourteous host, He says that she did this out of love because she had been forgiven. He didn’t say that she did this in order to be forgiven. No, she understood she had been forgiven – forgiven much – and her responses (which compensated for the lapses of Jesus’ host) were simply what a forgiven person would do in the circumstances.

In the very next chapter in John (21:15–17) we will read of Jesus’ poignant dialogue with Peter, asking him three times if he loved Him. Nowhere do we hear Peter saying he is sorry for betraying Jesus. Nowhere do we read that Peter asked for forgiveness. Instead we hear Jesus, by His questioning, opening Peter’s eyes to his true self and at the same time entrusting him with awesome responsibility.

Right at the beginning of Luke’s gospel (1:68–79) we hear Zachary’s prophetic statement concerning John the Baptist’s mission, which was to tell the people of their salvation in the forgiveness of their sins. And at the end, Jesus’ own death was an incredible manifestation of God’s forgiveness – given before it was asked. “Father, forgive them.”

These and a dozen or so other episodes all reach their fullest expression in Jesus’ statement in today’s gospel. Right after telling His disciples He’s sending them, He says: “Whose sins You shall forgive, they are forgiven . . .” “Ah!” you say, “but the very next line says ‘whose sins you shall retain they are retained’”. Doesn’t that say that God doesn’t forgive after all, but entrusts the Church to decide who gets forgiven and who doesn’t? This is perhaps where we have introduced complexity where simplicity should reign. The word “sins” is not actually in the original Greek of the second half of Jesus’ statement. We put it there in our translation because it is how we think things must be. This passage might be better translated “Whose sins you shall forgive are forgiven; those [individuals] you have embraced should be held fast.” We should remember that forgiveness in New Testament times

refers to baptism. So the best understanding of this phrase seems to be something like: “Those you’ve brought into this community by Baptism have received God’s forgiveness. Don’t lose any of them!”

But what about the Sacrament of Reconciliation and absolution? I can provide no better answer than that of Fr. Pat Malone, S.J., “The sacrament of Reconciliation is not to wipe away our faults. It is to make us more loving . . . It is to show we believe that the wrongs we have done can bury us in shame, but we choose another option; they will make us more honest to ourselves and more humble to those around us.” That’s what Jesus’ post-Easter questions did for Peter.

We have been forgiven much; let us therefore love much.

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