

## Peter and Paul Feast transferred - John 21: 15 – 21 Year B

Forgiveness. What was the first thing that sprang to mind when I said that word: did you think of a person, an event? How did your body react? Was there a slight intake of breath, did you feel a slight tensing in your body? Did you feel an emotion, if so, what was it?

Forgiveness can be both complex and simple. We all experience wrongs and hurts, losses and betrayals, and we all have wronged and hurt and betrayed others. We think of a person, a situation and emotions may arise: anger, shame, regret, sorrow for ourselves, for others. And the intensity can still surprise us, even years later.

Forgiveness is complex. Forgiveness, “as an act of love, is felt, not achieved. It can be given, but it may not always be received...It rarely goes one way. We may need to learn to forgive ourselves before we can accept others’ forgiveness...it demands that we take responsibility for ourselves with all the discomfort that may apply”.<sup>1</sup>

Forgiveness is multifaceted. There is the forgiveness between humans and there is the forgiveness between humans and God. Today, as we celebrate the feast of St Peter and St Paul, I want to focus on what it means to truly believe and accept we are forgiven by God?

Let’s begin with today’s Gospel reading. Jesus and Peter together on a beach, a fire and a question asked three times, ‘Do you love me?’ Why does Jesus keep asking Peter this question? Does he doubt Peter’s sincerity after the first answer, so continues to press him to tell the truth?

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<sup>1</sup> Forgiveness and Other Acts of Love: Finding true value in your life”, Stephanie Dowrick, 1997,

I think one thing Jesus is doing here, is setting up a kind of replay of a similar earlier event. It was not so long ago that Peter was standing in front of another fire, in a courtyard at Jesus' arrest and denying three times that he even knew him. I don't think that memory of betrayal was far from either Jesus' or Peter's mind during this beach encounter. I wonder what Peter felt as he remembered that time? We know he felt hurt, did he also feel shame, self-loathing? Did he feel he could never be the man Jesus had obviously envisaged he could be when he had called him as a disciple?

Notice that Jesus doesn't offer words of forgiveness. That's not to say that Jesus didn't forgive Peter. I believe he did wholeheartedly. Because Jesus gives Peter a commission, "Feed my sheep". Jesus entrusts to Peter the fledging church, the bride of Christ. Jesus wouldn't have done that if he didn't love and trust Peter. Peter is restored. And Peter responds to this with renewed love, courage and determination. Think of his powerful preaching on the day of Pentecost. Think of the legend that he was crucified upside down because he said he was unworthy to die in exactly the same way as his Lord.

But Peter still had to live with his past. I sometimes imagine there were people around that courtyard campfire who heard his denial and then saw him later, preaching and healing in the name of Jesus. Some may have been filled with contempt at this coward who had betrayed a friend, maybe they let him know. Peter had to live with that. And he did so by living into the love, trust and forgiveness Jesus had shown him. He became the man Jesus knew he could be.

Which brings me to Paul, or Saul as he was known before his conversion. With all due respect to Paul, I imagine he could have been a bit difficult to get on with. And before his conversion I imagine he was a total nightmare. He certainly was for the early church. Saul was a religious zealot and we know how unpleasant they can be. He was rounding up Christians, throwing them into prison. Perhaps ordering or even engaging in torture to glean information about the whereabouts of other Christians.

Then the road to Damascus experience and that complete turnaround. But Paul still had to live with his past. I wonder if, at times, preaching to Christians, he looked out at his fellow believers and saw people he had arrested, saw the families and friends of those he had imprisoned, perhaps some who hadn't left prison alive.

What might Paul have felt: shame, regret? Yet in today's letter we read, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith, there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness". What sort of man do you hear? I hear a man as bold and as confident as he was when he was called Saul. But now he is a man bold and confident, not in himself, but in Jesus and the absolute certainty he is both loved and forgiven.

After what Peter and Paul did, having to live with the knowledge and memory and fallout of what they did, they could have gone two ways. They could have retreated, full of shame, full of regret, full of self-loathing and sat out their lives in mental and emotional sack cloth and ashes. The denier and the persecutor. No good to themselves or anyone else. But they didn't. Peter and Paul made a choice. They made a choice to believe that when Jesus met with them on that beach, on that road, he was offering them total love and forgiveness and a way back. And they took that second chance and lived into that love and forgiveness and changed the world because their world had been changed.

Some of you may be sitting here, and as I have been speaking, you may have been remembering an incident, a time in your life that fills you with deep shame or regret. And perhaps you have tried to bury that memory, but it keeps resurfacing and you haven't forgiven yourself, and you think God hasn't forgiven you either. It still haunts you.

However, let me tell you, if you think this incident is bigger than God's ability and desire to forgive you, is stronger than Jesus' love for you shown by his death on that cross, you are completely and utterly wrong.

Because nothing is bigger or stronger than God's love and forgiveness found in Jesus. Remember Peter and Paul. But like Peter and Paul, you have to believe it, want it, accept it and then go and live it.

If this has stirred something in you today and you wish to explore it further, Colleen or I would be more than happy to meet, talk and pray with you in total confidence about God's forgiveness. God wants to forgive you and for you to forgive yourself.

The Lord be with you.