

HOMILY EASTER SUNDAY 02 – A  
“Mission To Believe and to Forgive”  
(Acts 2:42-47; 1 Pt 1:39; Jn 20:19-31)

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A fellow was hiking in the mountains when he fell over a cliff. Halfway down the face of the mountain, he luckily managed to grab hold of a branch with both hands that stopped his fall. Suspended between heaven and earth, he looked up and saw he had fallen a long ways. He looked down and saw he could have fallen a much longer distance – the cars below looked like ants. In desperation he called out for help. A loud voice responded, “Yes, what do you want?” The man asked “Who are you?” and the voice replied, “God.” “If you are God, can you get me out of here?” asked the man. The voice replied, “Yes I can – have faith, let go of the branch, and I will take you to safety.” The man looked up and saw how far he had fallen; looked down and saw how far it was to the road below, tried to let go of the branch, and finally cried out, “Is anybody else up there?”

Believe in Jesus and learn to forgive

The first words of the gospel today, “It was evening on the day Jesus rose from the dead, the first day of the week”, are a signal of a new creation. For John, they indicate a whole new reality, harking back to the book of Genesis. So too does the fact that in this gospel Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit on the apostles. The verb “to breathe” (*emphysao*) occurs only here in the New Testament, and evokes the description of God breathing life into the first human being – thus, a new, second creation. This is a paradigm shift, a whole new way of looking at things.

The way of the world, as you may have heard spoken at times, especially by psychologists, is fight or flight. When there is danger on the horizon, for both animals and humans, the first natural instinct is self-preservation, by either fighting to deal with the danger, or fleeing to avoid the danger. If we are anger-based, we will fight back immediately, tit for tat. If we are fear-based people, we will flee, and there are many ways to flee – alcohol, drugs, gambling, sex, silent treatment – anything to avoid the painful reality that confronts us.

There is a third way, the way of Jesus. That way is the way of forgiveness, of letting go of the desire for revenge. This way takes a lot of faith. To be able to move towards forgiveness, we must be grounded in the faith that Jesus had in the Father, and filled with his Spirit of forgiveness. The saying is so true: “To err is human; to forgive is divine.” The reaction of Thomas is an example of our human resistance to the invitation to forgive. Like Thomas, we have to come to greater faith, faith that can forgive.

The evangelist John is so enthusiastic about this new way of life that he rolls the Resurrection, Easter and Pentecost into one day of new creation. Everything happens at once for him. Jesus gifts his Church with the power of the Spirit, the agent of forgiveness, and commissions us to go and to what he did.

According to the New Interpreter's Bible this commissioning must be understood in its Joannine context. This is the only occurrence of the particular verbs "to forgive" (*aphiemi*), and "to retain" (*krateo*) in the Gospel. First, Jesus' words are addressed to the whole faith community, not just the apostles, so forgiveness of sins is the work of the whole faith community. Second, the community's enactment of Jesus' words depends on both his commission, and the gift of the Spirit. The forgiveness of sins must be understood as the Spirit empowered mission of continuing Jesus' work in the world.

And since John speaks much of sin, this passage must be interpreted in the light of Jesus' teaching and actions about sin. In John, sin is a theological failing, not a moral or behavioural transgression. To have sin is to be blind to the revelation of God in Jesus. Jesus brings people to judgement by his revealing work and presence in the world. Thus, Jesus commissions the community to continue the work of making God in Jesus known in the world, and thereby bringing the world to the moment of decision and judgement with regard to sin. And when the believing community receives the Spirit, they are empowered to carry out this work of the Paraclete.

The centrality of forgiveness to the message of Jesus, and the difficulty that our world today has with the whole concept of forgiveness, invites some reflection of the nature of forgiveness. Forgiveness is not about the other person and is not about forgetting. Forgiveness is about letting go of revenge. Forgiveness is choosing not to respond by blaming or attacking. It is about expressing my hurt with love to the one who hurt me. Forgiveness is the transformation of negative energy into pure love through prayer. In the end forgiveness is about being just like God, acting like God and getting to feel like God

The identity of the faith community is shaped by the gift of the Spirit, and the mark of that Spirit will be the power to forgive or retain sins. Forgiving sins means bearing witness to the identity of God revealed in Jesus. That combined with the command to love one another articulates the mission of the Church: By loving one another as Jesus loves us, the faith community reveals God to the world. By revealing God to the world, the faith community makes it possible for the world to choose to enter into relationship with this God of limitless love. It is in choosing or rejecting this relationship with God that sins are forgiven or retained. The faith community's mission, therefore, is not to be the arbiter of rights and wrong, but to bear witness to the love of God in Jesus.

So for John, the Church's life is intimately bound up with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. To celebrate the resurrection, is to celebrate the beginning of the Church's mission in the world. Jesus lives because he breathes new life into his disciples through the gift of the Spirit and commissions them to continue his work. This service to the world that the Church performs is above all, to teach the world how to forgive. It is this ability to forgive that will help others overcome their disbelief and doubt in a loving God.

In the soul of Fyodor Dostoevsky, the great Russian novelist, there was almost continual conflict. On one hand, he felt the strong desire to be in close union with God. On the other hand, he experienced an almost violent tugging away from any contact with the almighty. When, in his novel, *The Possessed*, the atheist character Kirilov admitted that

he was haunted continually by the God whom he was trying to deny, it was actually the author himself speaking. Not long before his death, Dostoevsky wrote in his diary this forceful, almost strident answer to those who ridiculed his return to faith: "Those fools could not even conceive so strong a denial of God as the one to which I gave expression. You might search the whole of Europe for so powerful an expression of atheism. Thus it is not like a child that I believe in Christ and confess him. My hosanna has come forth from the crucible of doubt."

The Eucharist that we celebrate now is a meal that forgives and accepts us, empowers us, and missions us to serve through faithful forgiveness

So remember, forgiveness is part of Christian service. Let go and let God, and learn to forgive.