Sermon

Lent V

7/4/19

Eltham

**Readings**

April 7th LENT V

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us

Readings:

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| Isaiah 43:16-21 | Psalm 126 | Philippians 3:4b-14 | John 12:1-8 |
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Lord, teach us to pray.

In this 5th week of Lent we can look back: and what an eventful time it has been, a time of wrestling with some of the big questions of life. Over the last four weeks we’ve made our way through the Lord’s Prayer. It’s given us pause to consider each of the phrases which it’s so easy to race through, gloss over, or see as completely separate from each of the others. At the heart of it, what we’re discovering (or being reminded of) is that the prayer is an expression of relationship with God our Source/Origin/parent/Father/Mother, and the petitions facets of that diamond revealing its heart. This week we’re doubly reminded of this as we consider “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” This is Jesus’ prayer, and in the mystery in which he shares his identity with us (“Our Father in heaven”), he prays this prayer with, in, and through us.

Think about that for a moment: Jesus identifies himself with “we” who sin. There’s so much to unpack in this idea. For a start, we’re not comfortable talking about sin or using the language usually gathered around it: repentance, reconciliation, atonement, wrath, blood, etc. With good reason: many of us were raised in contexts where it was drummed into us that we are vile sinners worthy of the wrath and damnation of God – and that particular theology casts a very long shadow indeed. We also shy away from talking about sin because that theological spectre continues to haunt certain church traditions, using sin as a stick to beat, exclude, and demarcate boundaries of belonging and not belonging. And let’s not forget that often when some church traditions see “sin” what they secretly mean is “sex”, “homosexuality”, or anything involving the body or difference from a patriarchal, heteronormative norm. That’s not a helpful or holy way of seeing sin or the body.

Those of us who carry this baggage try to soften the issue with language: we talk about “brokenness”, or misguidedness, about being “lost” or having “lost the way”. Feminist theology talks about the Fall (Adam and Eve with the apple) being a “fall into consciousness”, and that while the sin of pride may be a male sin, for women it’s the inverse: lack of pride. Liberal theologians think of sin as a denial of original blessedness, or as a disconnect from our Prime Mover, a failure of complete dependence on God. Liberation theologians see sin as a failure to reveal structures of power, and being complicit in oppression of the marginalized. All of these are useful balances and have value to offer, although they don’t really offer much to try to explain or deal with the evil of a gunman opening fire in a mosque, or the horror of men doing unspeakable things to children, or the mass killing of Hazidis by IS, or a person stabbing a partner to death, or… any of the manifestations of evil in the world through the centuries.

All of these approaches, the traditional and the more palatable, miss the mark in one way or another. So what is sin? The way I understand it, sin is anything that breaks our relationship with God, with others, with ourselves. It is unloving, unmerciful, unjust actions which alienate and destroy life. Sin is that which tends towards death and the actions that take people there. Sin can be conscious (as in, I deliberately rake my keys down your car), or unconscious (I buy coffee which unknowingly has been picked by children working in slave-like conditions). It can be the things we do, or the things we fail to do (whether conscious or unconscious). It can be patterns of life, and patterns of society which go far beyond us as individuals.

Western Christianity has a heavily individual focus on “my sin” and the things I’ve done wrong (thanks to St Augustine and his Confessions in which he first articulated a psychological understanding of sinfulness). But sin has a communal dimension. When we pray “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us” it’s one of those times in worship together where we join our individual intentions (ok, this week, I sinned in these ways and I’m sorry God), but also recognise the communal dimension (ok, this week, we as a community have sinned, or, sin has broken stuff among us and we are sorry God). What I do impacts others, sometimes in ways I have no idea about. What we say, what we think, can impact positively or negatively on things around us. So we rightly pray together “forgive us our sins” – not out of fear for ourselves, but out of solidarity with our fellow sinners, and in recognition that human systems in general are broken and in need of God’s healing presence.

Back to the idea of Jesus identifying with us in praying “forgive us our sins”. What Jesus is doing here is, just as in this prayer we’re reminded each time we pray it that we are God’s beloved children, adopted and united in Jesus with his life, death, and resurrection, so he takes us into himself. He shares our broken humanity, but without sin getting in the way. Part of asking “forgive us our sins” is about realignment with he who set a good example, and in whom our prayers are heard because he is divinely human and humanly divine.

It’s also in him we find the forgiveness for which we pray. It’d be ok if the petition stopped there, but there’s a conditional clause: “Forgive us our sins *as we forgive those who sin against us*”. That makes it sound as if our forgiveness by God is in proportion to and related to whether and how much we forgive those who sin against us. If we want God to forgive us, this seems to say, then we have to forgive those around us. Yes and no. God’s forgiveness is not conditional on anything we say and do. God’s forgiveness is always there because God is free and forgiveness is part of complete freedom. God is able to offer us free forgiveness freely because it is God’s nature to give Godself unstintingly. Jesus gave himself in life and death for us, and he provides the space of union with God. So God’s forgiveness is always there for us, and we enter into it when we turn to Christ and repent of our sins, promises made at our baptism, and which are lived out in our continued life with Jesus.

When we turn to Christ, repent of our sins, and enter into God’s forgiveness, we can’t fully be present to God’s forgiveness unless we let go of and forgive freely those or that which has hurt us. Forgiveness is about freedom. It doesn’t absolve the other person of responsibility, and doesn’t negate the price of whatever hurt was caused. (If you run into the back of my car, the car still needs to be fixed, and insurance monies exchanged – but I can forgive you your moment of distraction, and I can choose to let go of my anger and frustration that your moment of distraction has caused me inconvenience, not for your benefit, but for my own freedom. If you then seek to make reconciliation, then you appropriate my forgiveness for yourself in order that you may be free from guilt for having harmed me. If you walk away with no regrets and no acknowledgement that you’ve harmed me, then I wonder about your conscience and your awareness that you’ve damaged me and my property – which is a breaking of the law both human and divine. I can still choose to forgive you so that I may be free of resentment and bitterness, but if you don’t seek reconciliation, you cannot experience the forgiveness I offer.)

So praying Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us is about living God’s freedom. It’s another component of aligning ourselves with God’s purpose, intention and potential, with God’s heartbeat and energy. It’s about the heart of prayer which is drawing close, about pouring out our nard on Jesus’ feet and head as Mary did. Asking for forgiveness and being prepared to offer forgiveness to others is about the free flow of grace in and through our lives and our community – and beyond us, into our world.

Rather than being hung up on sin (because God’s not hung up on our sin, or stuck as we are, God is free), this prayer turns us back to God, seeking the enveloping presence of God’s goodness to enfold and protect us, to transform our lives and to help us be agents of change. Forgiveness, especially when we have been grievously hurt, isn’t easy. It’s not something anyone can dictate (“you must forgive”), and it certainly doesn’t negate being wise and discerning in future actions, or the person who’s hurt us, or we ourselves facing the consequences of what we’ve done. Forgiveness is sometimes a process. Forgiving and letting go again and again until we are free. Forgive us our sins as we forgive…

The old law: if you have a problem with someone, and you come to the temple to offer your sacrifice, first put the sacrifice down, then go and find the person and seek forgiveness and reconciliation, then come to the sacrifice. That’s why we have the greeting of peace. It’s not a free for all greet-fest. It’s supposed to be a sign of peace, a sign of forgiveness and letting go between each other before we come to Jesus’ table together, an expression of unity in him.

Who do you need to forgive? From whom do you need to seek forgiveness?

Lord, teach us to pray.

The Lord be with you.

 **And also with you.**