

May 11, 2008

Hear again the end of our gospel reading this morning:

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" – surely an extraordinary proposal!¹ "Peace" we might think we understand, and "the Spirit", but that the disciples of Jesus might be empowered to forgive or retain others' sin – that is surely a troubling thought!

And so most good Christians balk at such talk. If there is forgiveness of sin, is it not *God's* prerogative alone? But perhaps it is not the forgiveness but the retention of sin which really bothers us. Is it not "unchristian" not to speak forgiveness to others?

Before we go much further it will help to clarify what Jesus is almost certainly *not* talking about here. Modern mental health science, and not a little common sense, has established that it is psychologically good for us to forgive people who have wronged us. We are complex critters, and quite capable of making ourselves physiologically ill by focussing on a wrong we've experienced and living in the past with that hurt by failing to "let go" and "move on". And so we have come to understand that forgiveness is good for *us*, whatever it might mean for the one we've forgiven.

Now, whatever truth there is in that, it's not what Jesus is on about. He seems to be indicating a power to do as he himself has done – forgiving someone for wrong they've committed toward a third party.

Recall the story of the paralytic who was lowered by his friends through the roof of a building, to whom Jesus declared "your sins are forgiven", much to the horror of the religiously upright in that crowded room. It is this which Jesus now authorises the disciples to do. To forgive what wrong has been done to me is one thing. To declare someone forgiven for their wrongs against a third person is quite something else altogether. It is, indeed, a truly extraordinary, seemingly arrogant and self-important thing delivered here to the disciples.

But notice also that talk of the forgiveness of sins is closely linked to the giving of the Spirit. It is only after Jesus says, "Receive the Holy Spirit" – and, indeed, *straight after* he says this – that he goes on to speak of the forgiveness and retention of sins. These two things – the giving of the Spirit and the forgiveness of sin –

are linked in a way I imagine is strange to the understanding of most of us. (Indeed, it was a new thought to me as I attempted to make sense of this reading for today).

That strangeness probably has to do with ideas of spirit and sin we have in our heads which have little to do with the meanings those words have in the Scriptures. "Sin" has become one of the church's four-letter words, both within in the church and outside. It conjures up a range of images and associations. At the trivial end of the spectrum there is sin as "naughtiness" – to sin is to transgress in some almost comic way: "Positively Sinful" might be the advertising slogan for a new ice cream or chocolate bar. At the other end there's the notion of sin which involves lists of things we might do wrong. Our failure to observe Thou-Shalt and Thou-Shalt-Not items on a list is a particularly unhelpful way of representing what the Scriptures mean by sin, but it is perhaps our most common way of thinking about the matter. The sinner does something she knows, or ought to know, she should not.

When it comes to our usual notion of "spirit" we find that it doesn't really have much to do with scriptural ideas either. For us spirits tend to be ethereal, fleeting things without substance or body. A "spiritual" thing is really no *thing* in particular. It is neither here nor there,

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and so of little real consequence. It's not for nothing that these days "spirituality" is all the rage. While concrete and specific traditional talk of God is out of favour even in the churches, "spirituality" can find a strong foothold in our society because it isn't really about anything you can point to, and so seems to be quite harmless. Not being anywhere in particular, the

concerns of "spirituality" have no *public* presence; it's just what "I" happen to reckon, and it doesn't really matter what you think. On this understanding, my being "spiritual" makes no claim on you.²

Now, notice the difference from all this in what we have before us in our reading this morning: "*My*" having received the Spirit Jesus gives has something to do with the forgiveness of *your* sins. This is a *very* public type of spirituality, for it has to do not with what "I" just happen to think but also with what takes place between you and others and God.

If spiritual things *are* fleeting and ethereal and personal in common thinking today, they are far from that in the Scriptures. The New Testament "Spirit" relates to very concrete, tangible interpersonal relationships.

² Important in this connection: such a "spirituality" of no-thing seems to lend itself particularly to a society of discrete individuals. This suggests a degree of no-thingness in the persons in such a society; that is, individuals are stripped of their thingliness in their isolation/ individuality...

¹ See also Matthew 16.19b and 18.18.

In our reading from Acts this morning we heard Luke's account of the way in which the Spirit brought about a reconciliation of a humanity divided by language and culture. In the background of that story sits the old Babel myth, in which God scatters an arrogant humankind and confuses language, creating the division of culture and religion which still serves us well as the sign of human difference and discord.

The story of a diverse group of people hearing Peter in their own tongues is a hint that *this* God is not a tribal deity who defends his people against other peoples and their gods, but one who *reconciles* what has been divided.

Beginning here, we can begin to unfold a different, more profound understanding of sin and its effects. If the Spirit is that which unites and reconciles by making possible the forgiveness of sin, then sin is not mere moral failure or disobedience, but that which divides and isolates. The sinner is not the one who has done wrong, but the one who is alone.

To push the language further, and to get to the heart of the matter as the New Testament casts it, the sinner is the one who receives the "wages" of sin, which Paul identifies as "death" (Romans 6). But this also needs to be made clear. This may indeed mean that our hearts will stop beating; but more profoundly, it means that sin causes us to suffer the *effects* of death. And the effect of death, for those who live on and suffer it while still living, is *separation*.

None of us knows what it is for our hearts to stop beating, and not to start up again. But most of us know what it is when that happens to someone we love. The widow and the orphan know the isolating effect of death. When the New Testament talks of the effect of sin, it borrows that language of death and bereavement. The sinner is dead – beating heart or not – because he now stands alone.

The trouble with the list approach to sinfulness is that we will debate what should and shouldn't be on the list. But, however we might compare them, we know that we all have our *own* lists of what should or shouldn't be done, and have fallen short of that as well. Not only that, we share our list with like-minded people – our friends, or our lovers, or our parents, or our colleagues or employers, or whomever. Whatever we might do with the *word* "sin", we know what it is like to want to hide something we believe we ought not to have been involved in but were, ought not to have said or done but did. We hide it *from those who hold to the same code as us*.

And it suits us to keep that knowledge to ourselves, for that way we remain in the high esteem of those whose opinions we value. And this *isolates* us from each other, for we cannot be honest, for fear of judgement and rejection.

The sad irony is that we find ourselves in the hopeless predicament that we cannot be ourselves before those we love and value, because that might mean rejection and the loss of those relationships – *and so the loss of ourselves*. We are, to borrow a phrase, damned if we confess our failures, and damned if we don't. We suffer the death which is the isolation of knowing oneself a transgressor (so we say), and yet not being able to admit it in the wider community. We might borrow here from what we heard earlier from T.S.Eliot – we are consumed by either fire, or fire.³

Sin is what isolates, what interferes with honesty about ourselves before each other. The *forgiveness* of sin, then, is what joins, heals, re-connects. This brings us back to our gospel text. If the people of God – or *any* people for that matter – are to be peace makers, working to bring healing and reconciliation, then what is brought is also the forgiveness of sin – the naming and setting aside of what brought about the deathly division at the heart of our being in the first place.

More could be said about how this might actually take place between us, and in particular about the importance of confession, but that can wait until another time. The important point is that *Christian* talk of spirit or spirituality has to do with the nitty-gritty of human relationships in all their health and brokenness.

Elsewhere John speaks of the Holy Spirit as the one who brings the truth about sin and righteousness and judgement (16.8-11).⁴ This the Spirit can do because it is the Spirit's work to take the things of Jesus and remind his disciples of them (16.14).

And Jesus himself is forgiveness of sin. As recounted in our gospel reading today, he returned to his failed followers not with accusations about their having failed him but with the unexpected, undeserved and pacifying word: "Peace be with you" (20.19,21) They had done as badly as was possible for them, and yet still not accusation but forgiveness is laid at their feet.

Christian "spirituality" is this life-giving, bridge-building, reconciling forgiveness. It is concerned with the overcoming of what divides and isolates.

To proclaim that God deals with us this way, and gives his Spirit for this work, is nothing less than to speak of the forgiveness of sin. This is the message of hope for us, which are ourselves to become for those around us.

By the grace of God, may we respond with hopeful hearts, to God's greater glory, and our greater benefit. Amen.

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³ Four Quartets, (Little Gidding) section IV.

⁴ It is perhaps noteworthy that, when we say the ecumenical Creed of the church, talk of the forgiveness of sins occurs under the article of the Spirit.