

EASTER 2013

In my homily on Good Friday I referred at some length to a passage from the 53rd chapter of the Book of Isaiah, and tonight we have heard readings from the two following chapters of the same book, passages that are among the most beautiful and consoling in the entire Bible. In the first of these two, the Lord addresses not only the people of Israel but us as well with words of great tenderness: “The Lord calls you back, like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit.... With enduring love I take pity on you, says the Lord, your redeemer.... My love shall never fall away from you, nor my covenant of peace be shaken, says the Lord, who has pity on you” (Is 54:6,8,10). In the second of the two readings from Isaiah we heard similar words of God’s mercy and readiness to forgive: “Let the wicked forsake their way, and sinners their thoughts. Let them turn to the Lord to find mercy; to our God, who is generous in forgiving” (Is 55:7). Then, in our reading from St. Paul’s letter to the Romans, the Apostle picks up the same theme of leaving behind a slavery to sin and reveling in a new way of life, one opened up to us by the resurrection of the Lord. Paul writes: “We were indeed buried with [Christ] through baptism into his death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life.... We know that our old self was crucified with him, so that our sinful body might be done away with, that we might no longer be in slavery to sin.... Consequently you must think of yourselves as being dead to sin and living for God in Christ Jesus” (Rom 6:4,6.11).

It is no doubt easy enough for many of us, who have heard such words year in and year out, to fail to realize how utterly central they are to our whole Christian way of life. Throughout the New Testament, there is an intimate relationship between the proclamation of Jesus’

resurrection and the promise of forgiveness of sins. The Fourth Gospel concludes an appearance of the risen Lord on the first Easter Day with these words of Jesus to his disciples: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (Jn 20:23). And in a passage from Luke’s Gospel that we will hear on Thursday of Easter Week, that evangelist writes that when Jesus appeared to his disciples in Jerusalem, he opened their minds to understand the scriptures and said to them: “Thus it is written that the Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Lk 24:45-47).

We ought never underestimate the power of this facet of the Good News. Historians of religion who seek to explain how Christianity spread so rapidly throughout the Mediterranean world in the early decades of the Church regularly focus on this theme of forgiveness of sin, this freedom from debilitating guilt. One such scholar asks, “What produced this love and joy in these early Christians?” and he answers that it was release from three intolerable burdens: from fear (including fear of death), from the cramping confines of a self-centered ego, and from guilt. Of the last of these three, he writes: “Recognized or repressed, guilt of some degree seems built into the human condition,... We may manage to keep [it] at bay while the sun is up, but in sleepless hours of the night it visits us.... In its acute form, it can rise to a fury of self-condemnation that shuts life down. Paul had felt its force ... [saying]: ‘Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?’ (Rom 7:24).”¹

It may be that relatively few persons experience sinfulness to such a degree, but sadly it can afflict some in a very pernicious way. I once received a prayer request from a woman whom I have never met but for whom I have the utmost sympathy. In part, the request read as follows:

I would like to ask you for your prayer, because I am almost desperate. Please pray for deep healing for my soul... My soul is very strongly bound up with dense darkness ... and obsessive lies about my guilt. I can't say how exhausting this constant torture is. I am not able to move one step forward, not able to pray freely... Please pray that the Lord deeply heal every moment of my previous life of sin with His unconditional love, that I may know with all of my heart His love for me and have total trust in His infinite mercy and every grace I need for my healing.

I don't know any details about this person's life, and I am not so naïve as to think that merely reading such beautiful texts on forgiveness and new life as we have heard this evening would free her from this obsessive sense of guilt. There may well be need for expert counseling. Surely someone so clearly devoted to God ought to experience the joy and peace that Christ Jesus wants for all his followers. But even those of us who have been spared that degree of pain must still recognize that we all fail in various ways and so need to make amends. The Rule of St. Benedict is very clear about this. He has a number of chapters on how to deal with monks who have committed various faults, and in these parts of the Rule he regularly speaks of the need for the offending monk to "make satisfaction." Now just what does this mean? How does one "make satisfaction"? Actually, for Benedict it is pretty straightforward: humbly admit your fault. If the fault was public, then admit it to the whole community, even to the point of prostrating yourself at the feet of all the other monks. If the fault was private (or in Benedict's words, "hidden in one's conscience"), then Benedict writes that the monk is to reveal it "only to

the abbot or to one of the spiritual elders, who know how to heal their own wounds as well as those of others, without exposing them and making them public” (RB 46.5-6).

That sounds simple enough, but if we’re honest I think we’d have to admit that it is not always easy to admit one’s sins or failings to others and ask their forgiveness, even though doing so is the absolutely first requirement on the way to reconciliation. Indeed, at times this may be all that is possible, if, for example, the person whom one has offended will not acknowledge or respond to one’s expression of repentance. Ideally, however, forgiveness will be extended, and only then can we speak of genuine reconciliation. I’ll give you a simple example of what I mean, not really dealing with anything deliberately sinful but something that was nevertheless regrettable. Not long ago I forgot all about something that I had agreed to do for a group of about forty people, who were definitely inconvenienced by my forgetfulness. When I later realized my oversight I felt really bad, calling myself names that I honestly could not repeat here. I also wrote to the person in charge of the program, apologizing as best I could but without any certainty that I would get a reply. Instead, I got back one of the most gracious messages I have ever received. It began with these words: “Mercy, Mercy, Mercy, my brother,” and after some further sentences concluded with the admonition: “Don’t be harder on yourself than Christ would be. Happy Holy Week!”

I hope you don’t think that by recounting this little incident I have strayed too far from the momentous subject of our celebration this evening, the rising to new life of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. This new life is not something that anyone is meant to enjoy all by himself or herself. Rather, it is to be shared in mutual love and concern, and one of the very best ways to do so is by graciously being willing to forgive one another for whatever sins or failings might stand in the way of genuine life together. The intimate connection between Jesus’ resurrection

and the seeking and receiving of forgiveness that should mark our own lives was clearly seen by one of the greatest Fathers of the Church, St. Gregory Nazienzen. He spoke of it in his first very homily after priestly ordination, preached on Easter Sunday in the year 361. I'm pretty sure I quoted it once before, many years ago, but it is worth hearing again, and with these words of St. Gregory I will conclude my own homily:

This is the day of the Resurrection, and for me a fitting beginning [for my priestly service]. Let us all be united in heart, and let us give glory to God on this solemn festival. Let us address as brothers and sisters those who hate us, as well as those who love us and have helped us.... Let us forgive all things in the Resurrection.²

¹ Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 332-33.

² St. Gregory Nazienzen, First Easter Homily. A slightly different translation is available from the Catholic Information Network at <http://www.cin.org/easter1.html>