

Sunday 24, Year A: Read Matthew 18,21-35.

On thinking of what to say to you today, the word "contagious" came spontaneously to mind. There are many contagious things in life: contagious diseases, contagious fashions, contagious events (how about 9/11?). Many such things can be good, e.g. a contagious personality or contagious laughter, which can transform a mediocre social moment into a memorable celebration of joy. True, some people remain immune to what is contagious, good or bad.

So why did I think of that word in relation to today's Gospel? You could sum up Jesus' message to Peter about forgiveness, and the parable that goes with it, in the following statement: for forgiveness to be forgiveness it has to be contagious. Jesus teaches us the same thing in other, more familiar words: "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Somehow, one's request for forgiveness is proven to be sincere and to be truly taken to heart, only when one is capable and willing to forgive.

Last week's Gospel dealt with fraternal correction, with what to do to get a brother to admit he needs to be forgiven. This week, following on in Matthew 18, Jesus teaches what the only Christian reaction can ever be towards one who makes that admission, and that is, of course, to forgive.

It is interesting that, in today's Gospel, it is Peter who asks this question of Jesus: "How often must I forgive?". Peter had his struggles with sin and forgiveness. In the end, the contagious mercy of Jesus won him over. Remember that painful moment, where you can almost feel Peter cringe, as Jesus Risen asks him 3 times: "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these others?". But in today's episode, Peter is still early on in his "papal career", and is talking about how often one has to forgive anyone, as if forgiveness naturally had to have ... "its proper limits"! One might just hear the underlying mumbling of so-called human realism going on in Peter's head: "we can't have too much of this forgiveness business! We can't have the lawless and the scoundrel get away with too much! We need to be realistic! Somebody has to stop these people!"

Have you ever asked yourself how many times you've been to confession? 7, 70, 70 x 7, 700??? I know I have been countless times and, I'm glad to say, no priest ever put his hand up like a traffic-warden to say: "Stop! Your 7 times are up!" When I go, I expect forgiveness always to be given, I expect that hand to make rather the sign of the Cross and I long to hear those divinely comforting words of the priest: "I absolve you from all your sins!" Indeed, all of us know that forgiveness is always there awaiting to cleanse and comfort us, for Christ Himself has promised it so ... IF (and here's the "catch"!) I am prepared to admit my sin/s, express sorrow for them (show some minimal realization that I have caused pain to God, others and myself), try to make amends for them (do my penance) and resolve firmly to avoid them (real hope in the grace of holiness from the Lord). So, sin is not forgiven unconditionally. It is not the coward's naive pretense that one can just pretend evil is not there, or can just be blown away by some spiritual puff of air. Absolution does not ignore sin: it destroys it by the greatest power ever known on this earth: the power of the death and Resurrection of Jesus. But for that power to work in us, we need to identify (the famous examination of conscience) our sin, put it into words and spit it out. The sacrament of confession is not an anachronistic ritual for the pious or scrupulous few. Absolution is infinitely more powerful than a nuclear missile, but the Lord launches it only to destroy well-defined targets, and He only does so through the ministry of His Church. The power of the contagious mercy of Jesus is directed to the single soul and the single sin, a power He breathed upon the Apostles for the whole Church and for all mankind. Some have said, and I am inclined to believe it, that Jesus would have died and risen to obtain the

forgiveness of one single sin of one soul. Such is His love, such is the nature of forgiveness - not a miserable, begrudging, finger-wagging, threatening "well, okay then". Forgiveness, mercy are of the essence of God's own being: "Yahweh, Yahweh, God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger and rich in faithful love, pardoning crime, taking guilt away ..." (Cf. Ex. 33). In the face of this reality, Peter's question is pretty pathetic.

Another way of looking at the forgiveness given in the Church through the sacrament of reconciliation is to think of a blood transfusion. The sin-infected blood of our hearts is drawn out of us by absolution and the life-giving blood of the Heart of Jesus poured out for us, for the forgiveness of sins, is fed into us. We are recreated by the blood of Jesus, that is by the same power I already mentioned, the power of the Spirit, the Giver of Life, who creates within us a pure, renewed and steadfast heart.

But here again the "immune" idea comes back to mind. Like the wicked servant in the parable, it seems at times that we are immune to the forgiveness received, or at least offered. Why is that? Is it that we no longer believe in the power of Jesus to forgive in and through the Church? For reasons of "privacy" we limit our little heart-operation to our private rooms, for a whole host of reasons that could go frankly from sloth to spiritual blindness, failing to see that our sins are never "private" but infect the whole Body of the Church. Could it be that we no longer believe in sin at all? After all, so many things once defined as sins are now exalted as virtuous expressions of freedom by certain sectors of society! That could make us think, "Well, times are changing, I am a modern person, I need to go with the flow too", or it could simply be a wonderful excuse for reneging on moral responsibility and indulging one's puerile self-centeredness. Could it mean that I actually no longer believe in God at all, since if there is no sin, who needs God? If there's no God, there's no moral law, so there's no sin, so I am my own law (although, of course, I might choose from time to time to be or impose my law onto others if their freedom gets in my way).

Yes, this immunity to seeking and receiving forgiveness could mean all these things. But I think there is one more thing that it could mean, and it is a very difficult thing to grasp because it is very elusive. Perhaps I may never seek forgiveness because, deep down, I cannot forgive myself. I may think: "Why would Jesus ever on earth or in heaven want to forgive me?" This kind of thinking is a terrible, terrible thing, but is a real attitude that can be at work deep down within us: I cannot forgive myself for my own darkness and so I want no-one else, not even God, to tell me that they can. My brothers and sisters, when all is said and done, I think this is not a bad definition of hell. It is a place deep within my own spirit, which haunts me, frightens me but into which I am somehow locked, perhaps reluctantly but yet with some subtle approval on my part, and into which I will eventually let my whole self be drawn and, then, at the end, will myself throw away the key.

The merciful God understands this terrible suffering of the human heart, hiding like Adam and Eve in Eden, because afraid to be seen. In some senses, we might even think that it was the consuming fear of being seen in such pain that led Adam and Eve to cast themselves out of Eden. It is a "hell-hole" not dissimilar to the "pig-sty" of the prodigal son. The question is: will I, like that son, remember my Father's house? Or will I, like Judas, if indeed it was so for him, remain closed in my fear of being exposed, judged, but also in my fear of being forgiven, cleansed, renewed and exalted once more to the dignity of son?

The inability to forgive oneself becomes a well-spring of pain, which reaches beyond the spirit into the mind and body of man. In some cases, its root might be terrible experiences of abuse (of any kind), of addiction, of sexual deviance, of the despair of ever being fully loved, accepted, healed. What is the cause of divorce today? Could it be, among other things, that one or other of the spouses is struggling with this inability to forgive himself or herself? The result

can be that sons and daughters, looking good and happy-go-lucky on the outside, are actually tortured on the inside because they do not breathe at home the contagious fresh air of forgiveness, understanding, compassion. Is this where drug-addiction and alcoholism find their fertile ground? We often hurt, and hurt so bad, that we are afraid that opening our hurt, even to the ones who love us, we will be hurt even more. The ills of society might well be checked or contained by security systems, prisons, military force. But they will truly be healed only by mercy, and only by the mercy of God working contagiously through us, not just behind the confessional door, not only within the walls of the parish Church, but in the intimacy of our marriages, families, in the ethos that inspires our schools, educational institutions and places of work.

A final word. As long as you are not deprived totally of your senses, NEVER, EVER, EVER ... despair of the forgiveness of God. Despair is the victory of the Devil in a mind that freely embraces it. Despair has believed the diabolical gospel that evil is stronger than good, that Jesus was a fake and a failure and that good is the illusion of the weak and naive. Despair is the greatest lie of the Greatest Liar and, without compromise, you need to send thoughts of despair back to whence they came: to hell. Otherwise, despair is the sin of ceasing to hope for personal salvation from God, for help in attaining it or for the forgiveness of one's sins. Despair is contrary to God's goodness, to his justice and to His mercy - for He is faithful to His promises.

The mercy of God in Jesus is our ultimate hope, for it destroys even despair and beats evil down from its lying claims to have a power that is stronger than God's grace. Dying, Jesus destroyed sin and death; rising He restored our life. Only that is the Gospel.

The Church of Christ is the Church of mercy. We are that Church. Let us not be immune to His mercy, but be wholly infected by it, so that, by the power of His Cross, we might be merciful to one another and pray with sincerity and effectiveness to the Father of All Mercies: "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Amen.

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