

“Lord, you know that I love you”

A sermon preached by Revd Prof Rob Gilbert on the Third Sunday after Easter, 10 April 2016 at St Peter's Wolvercote. Readings: Acts 9:1-6; Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:1-19

Today I want to explore an idea which changed my life. It's a way of seeing the story of Jesus and what happens at Passiontide and Easter that I continue to find powerful and helpful. I want to offer it to you today. Some of you will perhaps know all about it already – but two or three conversations I've had recently outside the parish have made me realise that it's not only a way of seeing the Gospel. It's a way of seeing the whole of salvation history which people are discovering and finding a source of inspiration.

Oddly enough, given the importance of this view of salvation for my own personal development, I don't think I have ever preached on it – certainly not here, but not at all I think, not explicitly anyway. And the reason why it seems appropriate for us today is that one of the obvious themes running through both our reading from Acts and the reading from John is *forgiveness*. Paul is, above all, *forgiven* when he meets the risen Lord on the road to Damascus. He has been persecuting the Church and now he is forgiven. And the last part of the reading from John is a kind of liturgy of forgiveness, as the risen Jesus dramatically enacts forgiveness for Simon Peter. To each of Peter's three denials in the courtyard of the High Priest's house comes a question, “Do you love me?” and the increasingly exasperated reply, “Yes I love you” that culminates in an answer that comes right from the heart: “You know everything! You know that I love you!”

Anyway, to switch to the punchline, the reason why the forgiveness enacted for Saul Paul and for Simon Peter prompts me to talk about a way of seeing salvation, is that *for* that view a key way to describe Jesus's presence to his followers after the resurrection is to say that he is present to them *as forgiveness*. The risen Lord is the physical embodiment of *forgiveness* present for his disciples right in front of and in the midst of them. If we meet someone that we love, we might say that they are *present to us as love*, their bodily form represents love for us; if we enjoy spending time with them then we might say they are *present to us as fun* – we see them and fun enters our life or our awareness, we are chiefly aware that we are having a good time; or if someone needs us to help them then we might say they are *present to us as need*, their need fills our awareness when they are with us. In each of these cases the person we meet embodies love, fun or need. In the same kind of way, Jesus embodies forgiveness for his disciples and for us – in *his* presence we and they are primarily aware that we are *forgiven*, and set free from our sins.

That, anyway, is the conclusion of a book that changed my life back in 1997, called *Living in the End Times* and written by a former Dominican friar called James Alison. There are I think two reasons I found the way of seeing the story of Jesus he presents compelling. The first is that it enabled me to understand why people treat one another badly sometimes, and why I knew I had treated others badly at times. The second is that it enabled me to see the life and teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus in a newly coherent way.

The power of this view of human behaviour derives at least partly from the way in which it is grounded in everyday experience. It is based on the idea that human beings learn by imitating one another, and I think they do. Children imitate their parents to acquire language; and imitate their friends to learn how to play together; and as they grow up they work out what they enjoy and value in imitation of others. Of course some basic characteristics we have come from within, come from

our genetics and from aspects of our personalities shaped directly by our experience, but *how* our characteristics get *focused* is strongly influenced by the imitation of others.

The problem comes when you and I want the same thing, and then there are just a few possible outcomes. One outcome is for one of us to let the other have our way and not to mind at all – and this happens, and is a loving thing to happen, but it is quite rare. Another outcome is for our relationship to suffer, as one of us envies the other – and ultimately for us to fall out, or worse. The third possible route we could take is for the two of us together to blame someone else for our rivalry and for the envy that has crept in – to blame someone who we both agree is really the person responsible for our falling out. If we blame them and they become our scapegoat then we can save our relationship. Of course, they are not really to blame, that's just a useful fiction we unconsciously adopt as a ruse to keep things peaceful between the two of us. And this person we choose is often someone who stands out, who is a bit unusual, who is not like us and who we can therefore agree is probably consequently in the wrong. I thought in 1997 and I think now that we can see this kind of scapegoating happening all the time.

It's a game the media plays – they champion someone, and make us envy them, and that means they play on the pleasure we experience when we see them fall, when they take them apart. The tensions in society get focused on people who are a bit unusual, sometimes with tragic consequences – they can be unjustly and publicly blamed for things they did not do. The worst is when a whole ethnic or religious or social group is targeted for destruction as a pretend way of solving social or financial or political problems. It can't work, it isn't a solution but over the centuries it has been a route humans have taken again and again. And it's what happened to Jesus.

He entered Jerusalem as a hero and a hoped-for saviour on Palm Sunday – but the crowd turned against him and ask for him to be crucified. On Palm Sunday Jesus seemed to be the solution, by Good Friday he had become the problem for the people as well as for the authorities that orchestrated his death. "We have a law and by that law this man must die". Jesus remained the hoped-for solution for his disciples, but in the end they almost all gave up on him and on his vision. "They all forsook him and fled."

At the Easter Vigil we remember the story of salvation. The stories that led to Jesus include this pattern of envy and violence and the possibility of scapegoating too. At the start we have the story of Cain and Abel. Cain envies Abel for the favour he seems to have with God, so he kills his brother. Joseph's brothers envy him his special relationship with their father, made worse by the dreams he tells them. So the brothers sell Joseph to Ishmaelites passing on their way to Egypt. The Egyptians fear the Israelites – there are too many of them, they have become a threat – so Pharaoh orders the death of Israelite male children, but Moses gets saved. Saul envies David and tries to kill him, but fails.

But, from the beginning of the story of our salvation comes the opposite point of view. Cain kills Abel but God hears his blood crying to him from the ground – and according to Luke in his Gospel, Jesus explicitly links the death of Abel to the death of all just people who have sought to tell the world about God¹. Herod and Pilate between them scapegoat Jesus². God favours the outsiders that others would scapegoat – the poor, the alien at your gates, the migrant worker, the one man who tells the

¹ Luke 11:49-51

² Luke 23:12

truth. God wants us to visit prisoners, not condemn them. God wants us to tend the sick, not shun them. This is the story the Hebrew scriptures tell, and the story which Jesus inherits and makes his own.

Jesus is the scapegoated victim who turns the crime committed against him inside out and returns from death to forgive his disciples and all who turn to him. He subverts the human sin that attacked Abel and Joseph and all the other victims of envy and of mobs throughout history, by being subject to that sin, undergoing the worse humans can do – and returning from the dead to forgive. In doing that he says this: even the worse that humanity can do can be overcome by God, can be transformed by God. Saul set out to kill followers of Jesus, reacting against them, scapegoating them in the face of the pressure felt by the Jews under Roman rule. But the risen Jesus appeared to him, as forgiveness, and set him free.

Simon Peter denied Jesus, and so made himself complicit with the authorities who were pursuing his destruction. But the risen Lord appears to him as forgiveness and sets him free from his guilt by three questions which re-establish their love for one another. “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Then feed my lambs. “Do you love me?” Tend my sheep. “Do you love me?” Feed my sheep.

For all of us here now, this reminds us that each time we come to God through Jesus, and we say sorry as we do in every Communion service at the confession, we are being asked: “Do you love me?” And when we say yes, the answer we get is the same as that given to Simon Peter: “Feed my lambs, tend my sheep”. In the Communion service, and especially when we come to receive the bread and wine at the altar, Jesus is present to us as forgiveness, and a forgiveness that asks, “Do you love me?” and to which we reply, “You know everything Lord, you know that I love you.” So, he says, feed my sheep.

Amen.