

## **Sermon 12<sup>th</sup> March by Reader Annie Garden**

Psalm 32

John 21 1-19

### **How can I be sure I am forgiven?**

At one level, that seems such a simple question – being forgiven our sins is a basic tenet of the Christian faith. However, it's maybe not so simple. Bishop Westcott, a Biblical scholar in the late 19th century, wrote 'Nothing superficially seems simpler than forgiveness whereas nothing if we look deeply is more mysterious or more difficult'.

Just in the first few minutes of our service today we have said together that Jesus takes away the sin of the world; we have prayed to be cleansed; we have asked for God's mercy and cleansing and have had forgiveness spoken over us – to use the language of today forgiveness is the DNA of our faith.

We don't like the word 'sin' much these days – it's certainly not a trendy word – but it's because we sin that we need forgiveness. At its very root, sin means rebellion against God – and this is where the complexity of forgiveness comes in – how can God forgive people who are in rebellion against Him?

The Bible uses several words to describe forgiveness – one means 'lifting a heavy burden and carrying it away'; one means 'cover' – God covering over our sin; one means 'impute' – as when God imputed righteousness to Abraham – and Paul in Romans talks of divine forgiveness being a free act of God rather than an earned condition of humans – we might use the word 'amnesty' – all of these are terms we can identify with – so how can we have doubts about being forgiven? But the truth is that many people really struggle with this.

There are several answers to the question, 'How can I be sure I am forgiven?'

1. It was God's plan for His people from the start
2. The Bible is full of Old and New Testament characters who have been forgiven – and who committed pretty serious sins
3. To deny that God is able to forgive us is to say there is something He is not able to do and we put ourselves in the place of God!

### *It was God's plan from the start*

We know the story of the Garden of Eden – how God created Adam and Eve to have a perfect relationship with Him – and how that was destroyed by their disobedience – and from that time, God, who wanted to have that relationship of love with the people He had created in His own image, was looking for a way to make that relationship right again. For sinful man to have a relationship with a Holy God, he had to be made clean, his sins had to be forgiven. That was the basis of the Laws given to Moses – and the whole system of the ceremonies and sacrifices in the Temple – to make a way for sinful man to once again

be right with God. That was the reason all the prophets had their ministry – to call on people to repent and turn back again to God.

When people didn't respond to the prophets' calls and continued to sin, God's response was to send Jesus as the ultimate sacrifice – so that anyone who put their faith in Him, as the Son of God, could have their sins forgiven and their relationship with God restored.

The role of Jesus as One who could forgive sins was one of the reasons why the Jewish leaders could not accept Him. When He said to the paralysed man 'Your sins are forgiven' the response of the priests was 'Who can forgive sins but God alone?' (Mark 2. 7). One of Jesus' last sayings from the cross was 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23.34). One of Jesus' last acts on the cross was to forgive the thief who was being crucified alongside Him 'Today you will be with me in paradise' (Luke 23 43). Jesus' ministry was one of forgiveness – was that of making it possible for us to have the relationship with God that had always been God's plan

Forgiveness is God's way of making it possible for us to love and be loved by a Holy God. Our receiving that forgiveness is the only way we can come before God and not be destroyed by being in the presence of a Holy Almighty God. Because God wants to have a relationship with His created people, without taking away their free will, forgiveness has to be part of His plan

### *The Bible is full of Old and New Testament characters who have been forgiven*

If we were to consider every individual or every story told by Jesus about people who have been forgiven, we would be here all day – all have something different to teach us about the greatness and the scope of God's forgiveness of His people – so I will just choose a few.

The most famous one in the Old Testament is probably King David. He is the author of the Psalm we read together earlier when he wrote such fantastic words as 'Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit'. David is talking about himself here (you can read all about it in 2Sam 11). David had had an affair with Bathsheba, the beautiful wife of one of the commanders in his army, Uriah, and in order to cover it up, plotted to have Uriah killed in battle. He might have got away with it had not God sent Nathan, one of His prophets, to challenge him about what he had done. David realised he had sinned big time – and he knew he needed forgiveness – and as he writes in the Psalm 'Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD" and you forgave the guilt of my sin' and later 'Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD's unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him'.

David was completely forgiven and restored – and is described by God as being 'righteous' and 'a man after God's own heart'. David knew the depth of sin and the reality and joy and completeness of forgiveness

Forgiveness of sin is a theme throughout the New Testament – think of the disciples and Jesus' relationship with them – particularly Judas; think of the woman taken in adultery and Jesus' words to her – 'Neither do I condemn you – go now and leave your life of sin (John 8.4).

Jesus taught about forgiveness in many of His parables – who can forget the story He told about the Prodigal Son whose father spent days on the roof top of his house – searching for his son coming home – and then when he saw his first glimpse of him, went running as fast as his old legs could carry him to welcome him back – no recriminations – just total accepting love and forgiveness at the first sign that he had repented (Luke 15 11-31).

However, I think the greatest illustration of God's forgiveness in the New Testament is the way, after His resurrection, that Jesus dealt with Peter. Peter – one of Jesus' closest disciples – denied Jesus at the time He most needed his companionship, support and love – and before we get too full of righteous indignation at the dreadfulness of Peter's behaviour, we would do well to think what we might have done – and indeed what we do now!

Peter was lost – didn't know where to go and what to do. He had just let down the Son of God –and Peter must have thought that there would be no further role for him in Jesus mission. He had just blown it completely – shown that he was totally unreliable, unworthy and unloving. Until the incident we read of where Jesus singles Peter out from the picnic and reinstates him. That story still has the power to reduce me to tears as I think of the greatness of Jesus' forgiveness to Peter – and by implication, His forgiveness towards me – no matter what I have done.

*To deny that God is able to forgive us is to say there is something He is not able to do and we put ourselves in the place of God!*

Sometimes, though, we can read all about forgiveness – and accept that it is true – but still believe that it doesn't refer to me! God could never forgive my sin – it is too great or too secret! At one level, that can be saying that God is able to do many great and awesome acts – but He is not great enough to deal with my sin – I am too bad a case for Him – His power is not great enough.

I remember many years ago saying something about how I struggled with believing God could forgive me for something– and being told off big style for my attitude by a wise man of God. He pointed out to me what I was doing – and proceeded to tell me that it was a form of false pride – and the more I have thought of that event many, many years ago now, the more I realise he was right.

We all have vestiges of that false pride that have the potential to thwart God's plan to restore us – and we see examples of it in Scripture. Remember Naaman in the time of Elisha the prophet? (2 Kings 5) He developed leprosy and went to Elisha for healing and was told to go and wash himself seven times in the River Jordan. Naaman initially objected to this – thinking the River Jordan beneath his dignity – before accepting what he was told

and being healed. It was a similar thing too with Peter in the Upper Room on Thursday night before Jesus' death. You remember the story (John 13. 3-11), Jesus was washing the disciples' feet – and Peter – in a show of false humility – objected – until he was rebuked by Jesus.

So part of our difficulty in accepting forgiveness is our struggling to humble ourselves to receive it from God – and part of it is that, deep inside each of us, there is a bit that wants to maintain control – we don't like being dependent on anyone – even God (I know it sounds stupid when I say it like that – but I suggest you think about it for yourself).

A few weeks ago, I was having a major blitz in my garden after the winter. My neighbour came past and offered me his green bin should I run out of space in mine. I did so and later contacted him to say that I would put it out, full of my rubbish, in time for the bin men. He responded that he was happy to do it – and the friendly argument was brought to an abrupt halt when he said, very kindly, but very firmly, 'Annie, don't be so independent'!

We all like to be in control – and that goes even for our relationship with God – we don't like the thought there is nothing we can do without Him. That is brought sharply into focus when we think of forgiveness. There is nowhere else but God we can go for forgiveness; we cannot forgive ourselves – our forgiveness comes from Him alone. This means we have to accept God's control of our lives and our dependence on Him

There is no doubt God is powerful enough to forgive us our worst sins – and because of His great love for us is willing to forgive our sins – but we need to accept that forgiveness in humility and obedience – to do otherwise is to doubt God's ability to do it – and is basically putting ourselves above God.

So, how can I be sure I am forgiven?

I can be sure because forgiveness is part of God's master plan fulfilled in Jesus; the Bible, Old and New Testament, is full of examples of people being forgiven – and Jesus' teaching on forgiveness. Forgiveness is a fact. Our role is to accept it in humility and gratitude.

Amen

## **Questions for discussion**

*Please don't think you need to answer all these – you might find it more helpful to choose a few and spend some more time on them rather than tackle them all – it's up to you!*

1. Why is 'sin' not a popular concept today?
2. Do you agree with Bishop Westcott (yes – you are allowed to disagree with a Bishop!) when he stated that 'Nothing superficially seems simpler than forgiveness whereas nothing, if we look deeply, is more mysterious or more difficult'?
3. Why did God not just force His people to repent and turn back to Him – why did He have to use the Temple sacrifices and the prophets?
4. Of the various descriptions of forgiveness – a) lifting a heavy burden and carrying it away b) God covering over our sin or c) amnesty – which can you identify with and why?
5. What does the parable of the prodigal Son teach us about the enormity of God's forgiveness?
6. What does the story of the woman taken in adultery teach us about forgiveness?
7. Why do we find it so difficult to accept we are forgiven?

And something maybe to try on your own – share it with others if you wish, but principally it's just for you

8. David wrote such fantastic psalms about being forgiven (in addition to Psalm 32 see also Psalm 51) – why don't you try writing a psalm about how God has forgiven you.