



St Mark's Lenten Study 2009

Facing Jesus

Jesus took with him Peter and James and John and led them up a high mountain on their own by themselves. There in their presence he was transfigured: his clothes became brilliantly white, whiter than any earthly bleacher could make them. Elijah appeared to them with Moses; and they were talking to Jesus. Then Peter spoke to Jesus, 'Rabbi,' he said, 'it is wonderful for us to be here; so let us make three shelters, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.' He did not know what to say; they were so frightened. And a cloud came, covering them in shadow; and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him.' Then suddenly, when they looked round, they saw no one with them any more but only Jesus.¹

He entered Jericho and was going through the town and suddenly a man whose name was Zacchaeus made his appearance; he was one of the senior tax collectors and a wealthy man. He kept trying to see which Jesus was, but he was too short and could not see him for the crowd; so he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to catch a glimpse of Jesus who was to pass that way. When Jesus reached the spot he looked up and spoke to him, 'Zacchaeus, come down. Hurry, because I am to stay at your house today.' And he hurried down and welcomed him joyfully. They all complained when they saw what was happening. 'He has gone to stay at a sinner's house,' they said. But Zacchaeus stood his ground and said to the Lord, 'Look, sir, I am going to give half my property to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody I will pay him back four times the amount.' And Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because this man too is a son of Abraham; for the Son of man has come to seek out and save what was lost.'²

Facing Jesus Facing My Self

When we gaze on one another we gaze on the Cosmic Christ because "in all faces is seen the Face of faces, veiled in a billion riddles – yet unveiled it is not seen, until, at last, above all faces we enter into a certain secret and mystical silence of a face"³

When we think of forgiveness we cannot think of it in any terms other than that of facing. Facing up to the truth about who we are and what we are. Facing up to the consequences of our actions and those of others around us. Facing God who in the Old Testament was described as *unfaceable* but in the New Testament calls us to stand before him face to face through Jesus. Whilst Moses was not able to see God face to face⁴ for us it is the very fact that we can look upon the face of the crucified and risen Christ that effects our own forgiveness, acceptance and transformation⁵. The opposite of facing is hiding and forgiveness cannot spring from that which is hidden – it has to be exposed in order to be acknowledged so that it can be forgiven and we can be transformed⁶. The woman who approached Jesus through the crowd and touched his robe in secret wishing to remain anonymous was unable to continue to hide herself in the shadows. "Who touched me?" Jesus says, much to the perplexity of his disciples who were struggling to keep the crowds back from him. Does he not realize that there are many pressing in and touching him? But Jesus knew that he had been touched by one who was in need of restoration, and until whoever it was who touched him was able to stand and face him and the crowds (who had rejected her for twelve years as being worthless) she would not be restored to her full selfhood - even though she had been cured of her hemorrhaging⁷. This story is an illustration of our need to face Jesus and to face each other if we are to be truly able to face ourselves. She is restored to the fullness of who she had always been even though the years of rejection had robbed her of that status. When we face Jesus we face ourselves. When I face Jesus I face my self because Jesus is the archetype of all of humanity – all that I am created to be. Adam is the archetype of all broken humanity while Jesus is the archetype of all humanity restored. He is the first fruit of all creation⁸ and it is in him that we can see our selves fully restored to our own fruitfulness. If you abide in me you will bear much fruit.⁹

The words of Nicolas of Cusa echo the reality that it is in the faces of *everyman*¹⁰ that we see the face of the cosmic Christ – the all in all¹¹ – the one in whom we live and move and have our being¹². This is especially true of the communion of saints – the church. We are the body of Christ. Though we are many we are all one body because we all share in one bread. Jesus makes it clear that we are to be a fellowship of forgiveness and acceptance just as he has demonstrated in his own life, death and resurrection. Theologian David Ford of Cambridge University makes the point that *in the resurrection stories John offers an utterly face to face account of the joint transformation of the disciples into a community of forgiveness: 'He breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained"*¹³. In this same gospel Jesus also tells John to take Mary as his mother and Mary to take John as his son – a call to new community.

Transfiguration

To face Jesus is to accept that we are called to a life of transformation. Indeed the purpose of the life of faith is that of transformation rather than securing a place in heaven. Often the emphasis on salvation as gaining a place in heaven robs us of the true meaning of salvation as we become preoccupied with the future life beyond death. This is to misunderstand what Jesus means when he speaks of eternal life. Eternal life is the life lived in the Kingdom of God in the here and now. Augustine described heaven as the *eternal now* rather than some future place of eternal reward. The idea that salvation is somehow the securing of a ticket into the blue yonder is to sweep aside the call of Christ to see that salvation is in fact the call to transformation here and now. The theologian Paul Tillich even went as far as to say that an *endless future . . . without a final aim; [that] repeats itself. . . could well be described as an image of hell*¹⁴, going on to say that *the Christian message says that the eternal stands above past and future. "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end."*¹⁵ In the story of the transfiguration we see something, which at the very least is an illustration of how our lives are to mirror that of Jesus who is here disclosed as the one who is transformed into the visible image of the invisible God¹⁶. Peter, James and John – the inner circle – were taken with him to witness a disclosure – whether in the body or out of the body we cannot say¹⁷. What we can say is that this is a precursor to the call for our own transformation in the Spirit as followers of Jesus. The experience prompts Peter to urge Jesus to allow them to build tents for them to remain in so that they may continue in this wonderful experience. But Jesus will not allow it and tells them they must move on. The life of faith is a life committed to change, to transformation or transfiguration – the Greek word used in this passage translated as transfigured is *metamorphoo*, which is where we get our word metamorphosis. It indicates that Jesus is changed and in some way glorified and this is echoed in Paul's words about us being changed from glory into glory¹⁸. Paul also infers this in his call to us not to be conformed to the peer pressures and expectations of the society in which we live (be that inside or outside the church) but rather we should be transformed (*metamorphoo*) by the renewing of our minds in the power of the Holy Spirit¹⁹.

The reading above which tells of the story of the tax collector Zacchaeus is a story of such a transformation in the life of a man who had been despised and hated for his cheating ways. As a Jew working for the Romans collecting taxes and growing rich in the process we cannot underestimate the degree of shock from the onlookers when Jesus calls him down from the tree to invite himself to dinner. Whilst the words, "Your sins are forgiven" are not uttered in this encounter, the implication is obvious and this would not have gone unnoticed by those looking on. Zacchaeus is forgiven and restored to the fullness of his true self through table fellowship with Jesus and the experience transforms him radically. Incidentally, the name Zacchaeus in Hebrew means pure – this is not an accident.

Repentance or Forgiveness - What comes first?

And so to the big question – what comes first, repentance or forgiveness? It will not surprise you if I say that it all depends on what we mean by repentance. If repentance is simply saying 'sorry' then perhaps one could argue that repentance must come first. Did not Jesus say, *if your brother sins against you seven times in a day and then comes to say, "I am sorry", seven times, then you must forgive him?* However, repentance is not saying 'sorry' it is *metanoia* – a complete change of heart and mind. The Greek word translated in many Bible translations as *sorry* in the statement made by Jesus here quoted is actually *metanoia* and as such should be at least be translated as *repent*. Therefore Jesus is saying that if your brother sins against you seven times and then repents seven times then forgive him. The implication of this teaching is that Jesus is speaking about the transformative nature of repentance and forgiveness. Repentance is not a one off event but an ongoing transformation as is forgiveness. We must go on repenting – changing, being transformed, as well as forgiving, restoring the other to full selfhood. Repentance is not only being sorry - it is a change of heart and mind. I can be sorry and remain the same - but if I am truly repentant I cannot remain the same simply because repentance is *metanoia* which is an ongoing mark of transformation.

This change can only really begin as a response rather than as a primary action. If by repentance we mean change or

transformation, then it can never be something we do in order to illicit forgiveness since it is by grace that we are being made whole and not by any action of our own. This is why I often say to people, we are not good in order to be loved, we are good *because* we are loved. The motivation for my doing anything which could be described as ‘good’ must always be in response to the love of God and never as an attempt to win God’s love. In the same way, repentance is always a response to forgiveness and never a means of gaining forgiveness. The Father in the story of the Prodigal Son was already forgiving the son even before the son had time to express his repentance. The man who was brought to Jesus did not request forgiveness but when his sins were forgiven his life was transformed which was made evident in the fact that he was able to walk home. Zacchaeus is transformed by the love and fellowship (and by implication the forgiveness) of Jesus and his response is repentance, *metanoia*, and instead of stealing from his fellow Jews he gives back to them fourfold what he had taken from them. Repentance is in fact only possible in the light of grace - without the free and unconditional love of God as demonstrated by free and full, unconditional forgiveness, then true *metanoia* is impossible. All other attempts at transformation and change become mere efforts on the part of human nature to improve itself in its own strength, at best as an attempt to gain acceptance or recognition, and at worse as an effort to seek to justify ones own ability to effect a change of any worth. Transformation comes as a response to grace poured out and freely received - Zacchaeus is an example of this - a whole town gets rich because one man is forgiven.

Therefore I am arguing for an understanding of forgiveness that is offered freely and once acknowledged and received then repentance is the evidence of the appropriation of that forgiveness. What is more, this is not a once off event but an ongoing transformative reality as we continue to live lives of love and mercy evidenced by forgiveness and repentance.

For Jesus, forgiveness cannot be earned, whether through repentance or by any other means. But our repentance is the only adequate response to God’s forgiveness²⁰.

This is demonstrated most powerfully in the words Jesus utters from the cross when he says, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do”. Saying sorry or expressing remorse for wrongs done is never enough and would be a poor way of earning forgiveness. And we have established that forgiveness cannot be earned but is rather a gift of grace.²¹ This is not to say that a sense of sorrow and remorse is not important as a mark of our taking seriously the consequences of our mistakes and wrongdoing. But it is never the thing that prompts forgiveness. It is forgiveness that prompts sorrow, which in turn prompts the desire and conviction to change our ways - repentance. The life of faith is a life of transformation and that is made possible by the revelation of the free and full forgiveness of God for all humankind found in the person of Jesus Christ.

¹ Mark 9.2-8

² Luke 19.1-10

³ *Meditations of Nicolas of Cusa* – James Francis Yockey quoted in *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* by Matthew Fox

⁴ Exodus 33.20 – although earlier in the chapter (vs8) Moses is described as talking face to face with God – both verses are speaking metaphorically since God does not have a face on which we can look – verse 20 refers to the glory of God – face is used as a metaphor for glory and it was in this sense that Moses was not able to look upon the face of God in this passage. See the next note for a new testament understanding of the glory of God in the face of Christ and the community of the saints.

⁵ consider 2 Corinthians 3.18; *And all of us, with our unveiled faces like mirrors reflecting the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the image that we reflect in brighter and brighter glory; this is the working of the Lord who is the Spirit.* And 2 Corinthians 4.6; *It is God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ that has shone into our hearts to enlighten them with the knowledge of God’s glory, the glory on the face of Christ.*

⁶ Eph 5.12ff

⁷ Mark 5.21-34

⁸ 1 Corinthians 15.22

⁹ John 15.5

¹⁰ This term is used inclusively and not meant as gender specific

¹¹ Colossians 3.11

¹² Acts 17.28

¹³ *Self and salvation* by David Ford, scripture quoted from John 20.22

¹⁴ Quoted from his sermon *The Eternal Now* found in his book of sermons *Shaking The Foundations*

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ Colossians 1.15

¹⁷ See 2 Corinthians 12.2ff for Paul’s mysterious account of a similar experience

¹⁸ 2 Corinthians 3.18

¹⁹ Romas 12.2 – the word again here is

²⁰ *Embodying forgiveness* By L. Gregory Jones

²¹ Ephesians 2.9