

"Who Can Forgive?"
Homily of February 23, 2003
by Fr. Brian Timoney

I'd like to begin today with some quotations. They will be, all of them, I am sure, quite familiar to you.

"Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them.... Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.... Be reconciled with your brother or sister and then come and offer your gifts.... If you forgive the sins of others, your Heavenly Father will forgive you yours. If you do not forgive others, neither will your Heavenly Father forgive you.... When you stand to pray, forgive anyone against whom you have a grievance.... If your brother sins against you seven times a day and seven times a day says 'I am sorry,' forgive him.... Father, forgive them. They know not what they do."

Each one of these quotations is very, very familiar. And when we hear them announced, or when we read them by themselves, they are so familiar that they sometimes pass right over our heads. But when we see them here together, this is very powerful. Isn't it? They are, all of them, words of the New Testament. But they are only some of the passages in the New Testament that give us an answer to this question by the Scribes, "Who can forgive sins?" I think in all of these passages, and in all of the New Testament, Jesus is answering very clearly, "I am not the only one who can forgive sins. You can forgive sins. You should forgive sins. You must forgive those who have wronged you."

We should not blame the Scribes too much for their question. Indeed, for them, it was quite justified. Their Jewish Bible, what we call the "Old Testament," is the story of God's relationship with humanity, in particular, with the Jewish people, the people of Israel. And it is a story of the people constantly rebelling against God and constantly being forgiven by God. It is largely about God forgiving. The Christian Bible, what we call the "New Testament," is not only about God forgiving in the person of Jesus Christ, but very much about the imperative of our forgiving one another. So, the answer that we as Christians can give to the question, "Who can forgive sin?" should be a very emphatic and strong, "WE can. We should. We must, by and with the grace of Jesus Christ."

The gospel story we read is a very dramatic one indeed, the crowd all packed in the house, no room even around the door, these men bringing the young paralytic man, trying to get in, not able, breaking a hole through the ceiling, and lowering him down. And the first words Jesus says are, "Your sins are forgiven." I've often wondered if He were referring to the hole in the roof that they had made. But, I've also reflected that no one asked Jesus to forgive sins then. There was no act of contrition! The young man

hadn't said, "I'm sorry." Jesus, just out of the goodness and the love and the mercy of His own personality, turns and says, "Your sins are forgiven you." There is no limit to the forgiveness that is flowing from the love of Jesus Christ for us, and the forgiveness was given abundantly without question. Likewise, there must be no limit to our forgiveness and it must be freely given, as the forgiveness of Jesus was. Remember when Peter asked Jesus, "How many times do we have to forgive.... seven times?" Jesus said, "Not seven, but seventy times seven!" meaning that there must be no limit whatsoever to forgiveness.

Personally, I believe that this is one of the most difficult things that we Christians are asked to do. And I believe that it cannot be done without a very special grace from God that is obtained in prayer. And here, I am speaking from personal experience. In one of the parishes where I served before coming here, there was a man whom I trusted completely. I consulted him on all the major decisions I was making about the parish. In fact, I regarded him as a close friend. Then, one day, we had a disagreement and he, publicly at a meeting, questioned my personal integrity and said that I was not fit to be a pastor. Well, I was deeply, deeply hurt, and the fact that, in the original disagreement, he was partly right, did not lessen the hurt. I just could not put it behind me. It was just gnawing at me inside. I could not forgive him. I talked to a spiritual director, and I prayed about it. And I believe it was this that finally led me to say to myself, "If you cannot forgive, then you cannot stand at the altar and say, "Peace be with you." ..."Leave your gift at the altar and go first and be reconciled to your brother, and then, coming, you can offer your gift." I said it took a number of weeks and, indeed it did, but at last, thanks to the grace of God, I was able to give that man a hug as he came to Mass one Sunday. But it was a real struggle, a real, real struggle, one of the hardest things, I think, that I have been asked to do by God.

Yes, it is not easy, but it is the Christian imperative. We do not forget. The hurt remains. The relationship will rarely be ever the same again, because, in that, we are not like God. For God, the relationship always remains the same. God always loves us, no matter what we do. But if we can say, "I forgive you," then the spirit of Jesus will have triumphed. We will have overcome evil with good. Jesus said, "Love one another as I have loved you." This is the Christian ideal, "...as I have loved you." And it was this inexhaustible love of Jesus for us that brought Him to the point of saying, "Father, forgive them. They know not what they do." This is the ideal for all of us as Christians.

Who can forgive sins? We can. We should. We must.... Amen.