

EASTER III 5 May 2019

A Homily preached by the Reverend Roger B. White, Rector of St Andrew's Parish, Kent, Connecticut

Acts 9.1-6; Psalm 30; Revelation 5.11-14; John 21.1-19

The Seven Last Words from the Cross, as they are known, are gathered from all four Gospels and there is not much overlap among them. Luke's the only Gospel that records one of the most moving of them, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing'. In Luke's writings, the importance of forgiveness –imperative throughout the Gospels—has an especially significant place. Even on the cross, whilst they are executing him slowly and brutally, Jesus prays for those who are killing them, forgives them even as he forgives the crimes of the criminal who requests it. 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.'

In the Faith, the bestowal of forgiveness is something to which each of us are summoned. Forgive: just forgive Jesus on the cross is able to do it; human flesh is capable of it. Just forgive

And on this morning, we hear two remarkable, memorable stories about forgiveness. The first is that of Saul –we now know him as St Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles—but he starts out as Saul, a Jew who was fiercely opposed to the burgeoning movement then known as The Way and now also known as Christianity. At the martyrdom of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, Saul is on the sidelines, gloating as Stephen is stoned to death. Then Saul travels down to Damascus to see if other Jews there are forsaking the traditions of their forebears and embracing The Way, for he wants to punish them, too. And just about as he is to enter that city, a bright light blinds him, he falls from his horse, and hears the voice of Jesus asking him, 'Why are you persecuting me?' In that moment –now known as a 'Damascus Gate Experience'—Saul has a profound experience of conversion to what he had furiously opposed –the sudden awareness of what followers of The Way had come to realise, that Jesus is the Lord of All Creation; and in that moment, the raging persecutor becomes one of the greatest of the Apostles.

Jesus forgives Saul, and through that forgiveness Paul becomes the Apostle to the Gentiles. Jesus tells him that he will soon receive instructions as to what he needs now to do, and when the instructions arrive Paul learns that he is to proclaim the Resurrection not only to Jews but to non-Jews, Gentiles, as well, scandalizing many of the early Christians in Jerusalem. Paul is to preach the Gospel to not just Jews but to the others for whom Jesus died, for whom he was sent.

And we need to remember that the Book of the Acts is Part II of Luke's writings: Part I is the Gospel of Luke; the Book of the Acts is Part II and continues the story after the Resurrection and the Ascension. And always, in Luke, an encounter with forgiveness is ... life changing.

This morning we also hear the story of the final Post-Resurrection appearance of Jesus in John's Gospel. It takes place at the Sea of Tiberias and contains that exchange between the Risen Jesus and the impulsive Peter: 'Peter, do you love me?' – 'Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.' – 'Feed my sheep.' Three times Jesus asks the question because ... think back to the Passion

narrative when, in the courtyard, and as Jesus has foretold him he would do, Peter denies even knowing Jesus three times before the cock crows. Now on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias, Peter receives the chance to redeem himself from that terrible betrayal. Jesus forgives Peter, and Peter's life is changed forever, even as Paul's has been. Peter also will die for his Faith, martyred in the same year as Paul and in the same city, Rome. Peter the impulse becomes steadfast, and like Paul comes to understand who Jesus truly is and what that means for his own life, his own actions.

Forgiveness, Luke and the other Gospel writers say, is life-changing, and today we have the invitation to remember the power of forgiveness, what it can do, what it might do. We have the invitation to remember just to forgive

I invite you to pick up the Books of Common Prayer in the pew racks and to turn to page 302. The questions on the bottom half of the page are part of the beginning of the rite of Holy Baptism, and we hear them and the responses each time we baptize someone here. There are three Renunciations and three Acts of Acceptance, for at this moment in the baptismal liturgy we are all of us standing in Peter's sandals because each of us baptized has found some ways in which to deny knowing Jesus, somehow to deny knowing what we are called to do –and always, always we have found forgiveness. It is part of our baptisms, this invitation to remember that we have been forgiven and so in turn to forgive ... just to forgive. Amen.