

*“Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them.”* (the Gospel).

Is there something new and important in Christianity, and if so, what? In There are several possible answers, including the view that there is little new at the level of ideas, the point is that what had been ideas now turns into events - we no longer believe the possibility of resurrection, we respond to our risen Lord.

One view is that the most important idea - and indeed event - is the forgiveness of sins. Jesus was declaring and so bringing about this forgiveness from the start of his ministry. It does not depend on the cross as such, but upon his authority which he exercises on behalf of his Father.

We cannot say the expectation of forgiveness was wholly new. “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow” (Isaiah 1.18) And there were sacrifices for sin. But the gospel picture is very striking; Jesus frequently declares God’s forgiveness of sin, even when we would rather expect a healing miracle, and is hated for it.

Saint John follows this line of thought. Forgiveness is characteristic of Jesus and so it must be his first and essential gift to his followers; this before all others is the way in which His gift of the Spirit is realised in them.

The church, then, has and must have that ministry of delivering God's forgiveness. Yes, there may be and historically have been classes of sin which the church “retains” (in other words leaves to God to decide) but the general ministry is to “remit” or forgive.

The startling promise is that the church will get it right in forgiving sin; “receive ye the Holy Ghost” breathed on them for that very purpose.

This is potentially the business of every Christian. For in an emergency any Christian might have to baptise, and one effect of baptism is the remitting of actual sins (which is obviously more important for an adult than a child).

It is also the business of the priest and the bishop. Whenever we meet, you hear me declaring and so delivering in accordance with the Father's promise that he does “pardon and deliver you from all your sins”. This is also an individual ministry (confession and absolution) provided for in the Prayer Book, if anybody needs that help; and for the Bishop it can be a public ministry, when the sin itself is also grave and public.

In all these cases there is the possibility of “retaining” the sin to God's judgement; but it is always forgiveness that “wears the trousers”. And those who object to forgiveness in any case must always be mindful of the Lord's teaching: are you comfortable to be the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son? Do you hear that “there shall be joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine righteous persons, which need no repentance” (Luke 15.7).

Saint Paul sees forgiveness from the other side of the cross, but he correctly grasps how fundamental it is. We could not work our way into God's good books - the good news is we do not have to because He has put us there.

This then is at the heart of the Easter message. As I have already indicated, Saint John has made this the “punch line” of his gospel; “as the Father has sent me, even so send I you”, to do this, inspired by the Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Ghost, before all else. Precisely because it was at the heart of Jesus' earthly ministry, so it may be said that the Resurrection vindicates his declaration of God's forgiveness (compare Acts 5.31-2).

And if it vindicates Jesus, so also us. This is good news indeed; there is no spiritual state so bad that rescue is impossible. However poor we know our performance as Christians has been, there is always hope. Hope, not because we can work our way out of the problem, but because the Father chooses, through Christ and his Church, to give his forgiveness to anybody who will receive it. And we, who know that we need and receive that forgiveness ourselves, can only rejoice when we see it received by somebody else.