

Trinity XIX

God for Christ's sake has forgiven you (Epistle).

For once in these Sundays after Trinity, both Epistle and Gospel touch on the same point - forgiveness. Not perhaps straightforwardly. We need to remember that in Galilee (and the ancient world generally) medical doctors were rare, expensive and not very effective; healing by prayer (at best) or magic (at worst) was the only hope available to most people, and there were many practitioners. Nobody is therefore very surprised that the Lord can heal - it is perhaps what you might expect of a prophet (Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah), and proves no more than that he is a Man of God. Neither Jesus nor the Old Testament prophets behaved as if healing were their chief purpose.

But forgiveness is of another order. Of course, the duty to forgive one's brother for a wrong was declared. Of course, God would forgive the sins of those truly repentant, and this was taught. We should not forget either of these truths, which remain true in Christianity. But I am not aware that a Jewish priest, or a rabbi, ever pronounced God's forgiveness to a penitent; at most (and this is not trivial) they would pray to God for him or organise a sin-offering.

Jesus, however, goes straight to the point. Here is a man who needs God's forgiveness for sin (even if he seems to need bodily healing), and Jesus has the authority to pronounce it. What Jesus says is effective because he says it; the man is forgiven - he "*hath power on earth to forgive sins*".

There is a temptation to supply steps in the argument, that sin has caused the illness and therefore forgiveness will cure it. But that is not in the text. Jesus works on the basis that the man needs God's forgiveness; the healing, however welcome, is a secondary matter even to the sufferer.

To forgive sins is God's prerogative, we have seen. The story leaves the choice: is Jesus exercising the powers of God both in forgiving and healing, or is the forgiveness a lie and the healing (since it is a fact) in origin diabolical? No middle view of this incident was possible; either the Father backed both forgiveness and healing, or neither.

The Gospels are convinced that the forgiveness is true, and indeed relate how Jesus gives that authority to the Apostles (and so to the ministry today, to "declare and pronounce to God's people, being penitent, the absolution and remission of their sins"). Read John 20.23 "*whose soever sins ye forgive . . .*". This is an essential feature of Christianity, and it is very different from both Judaism and Islam. Not that the priest, in giving absolution, can change God's mind or overrule him! But, under all normal circumstances, what is pronounced on earth will be ratified in heaven.

Christianity is not unique in recognising that sin is a general and a very serious problem. Jewish works of a time not long after Christ, like the 4th book of Esdras, envisaged the possibility that sin was a fatal problem - that there was no way out - though that is not the ultimate conclusion of that book. The New Testament, however, is certain that God's remedy is fully adequate. That is why it is "good news" (which is what the Greek for Gospel means). We are all sinners; but we all receive God's forgiveness. This is so utterly fundamental to our life as Christians that St. Paul can make it the basis for particular characteristics of our Christian life - we are to be "*kind, tender-hearted and forgiving*" because that is how Christ began (and continues) with us.

Forgiveness by God is then a present matter for the Christian. Of course we are not to be presumptuous; but we are to go forth as we are:

"Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
Who like me his praise should sing?"