

**Pentecost 3 17th June 2007,
Rev. Rob Lamerton**

Readings:

2 Samuel 11:26-12.10,13,14

Psalm 32

Galatians 2:15-21

Luke 7:37-8.3

Text of readings is available at <http://divinity.library.vanderbilt.edu/lectionary/CEaster/cPentecost3.htm>

In the Canberra Times yesterday, there was a picture and story about the driver of the truck that collided with a train near to Kerang in Victoria last week. On a nearby page was a picture and story of the man whose wife and two daughters were killed. He was attending their funeral.

I often wonder how, in such a situation, the men will cope. Will the father be able to forgive? Will the truckie be able to find forgiveness and healing for himself? There are so many situations in which forgiveness and the experience of forgiveness seem to be necessary.

Take, for example, the young woman driver who, when chased by a police van, ran a red light and accidentally killed a woman. The driver was found to be under the influence of prescription and other drugs. She was sentenced to periodic detention and found to have drugs in her possession on reporting for her second period of detention. She now faces jail. She cannot avoid the consequences of her actions. But will she face the responsibilities, do her time, and eventually find forgiveness in the world around her?

Then there's the young Raiders player who seems to have been given a balance between forgiveness and guidelines laid down by his football club.

Then again, there is the vast forgiveness needed for the Palestinians to get on with each other and to deal with Israel.

In each case, forgiveness needs to be balanced with the need to face the consequences of one's actions and to deal with the realities of the situation. The heart of the message in today's readings is forgiveness.

As we begin to work our way through the Sundays after Pentecost, we are called to reflect on aspects of our life with God, our life lived as God's people and influenced by God's Spirit. Today we ponder the whole idea of forgiveness.

If we look around us, we find the need for forgiveness to be a way for people to learn to deal with each other and move on from past hurts to new and more fulfilling ways. We are reminded that forgiveness is at the very heart of God's relationship with us!

In our first reading today, we hear of the great and legendary King David of ancient Israel taking Bathsheba to be his wife, but we did not hear in today's reading of how manipulative, cunning, and murderous David was in having Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, lured to the front of the battle and killed — so that David could satisfy his selfish desires with Bathsheba. What we do hear is how the prophet Nathan confronts David with his guilt of murder and adultery.

Nathan tells the story of the rich man with plenty of flocks and herds who steals the single lamb of a poor man to feed his guests. David sees the injustice in this story and is incensed! So Nathan declares "You are the man" and explains how the story relates to David's own life. David is then profoundly aware of his guilt. Nathan pronounces God's forgiveness — "now the Lord has put away your sin" — but also tells the consequences of David's sin:

— "The sword shall never depart from your house" — bloodshed will follow him; and

— the child of the union between David and Bathsheba will die (and we only hear the beginning of that story!).

Now I don't believe that God is in the business of killing babies to get at their parents, but David very much

saw this to be the consequence of his sin.

The Gospel story we have before us has been read by many to say that Mary Magdalene was the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her hair. But the connection between the stories is very uncertain. It is only that Mary Magdalene is the first name mentioned as Jesus moves on from here that has connected her to this story.

In the story, set in the house of a Pharisee, the woman was behind Jesus, at his feet, weeping. She began to bathe his feet with her tears and dry them with her hair. Then she continued to kiss his feet and anoint them with ointment that she had brought.

Unemotional and undemonstrative people might be a little unnerved by such a display. The host points out that, if Jesus really was up to scratch as a prophet, he would know that the woman was a "sinner" and therefore unclean — a tag which could be applied to people who did not fulfil a whole range of requirements, from food and dietary rules to observance of the Sabbath. It seems that she had a "reputation" that, according to the reckoning of the Pharisees, put her out of touch with God, out of God's reach.

The parable that Jesus tells, of the two debtors, makes *love* the outcome of forgiveness. "Which of them will love him more?" Like David, Simon the Pharisee is caught by a story. "I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt." I wonder if this is what Jesus wanted to say to Simon:
— if you realised the forgiveness you have received you would be able to love!
— if you were aware of your own weakness and frailty and sin, and knew God's forgiveness, then you would be able to forgive and love even this woman.

Jesus compares Simon's lack of generosity with the great generosity of the woman. "Therefore her sins, which were many (there is no denial that she is a sinner) have been forgiven." Hence she has shown great love. "But the one to whom little is forgiven loves little."

How were her sins forgiven? Not by her act of devotion to Jesus, not by his acceptance of her, even though she was a sinner. Jesus words to her, "your sins are forgiven" confirmed something she felt in her own heart and mind.

It is Jesus' acceptance of the woman who is a "sinner" that illustrates what Paul was talking about. Justification (being put right with God) is by faith. It is our human faith acceptance of the acts of God. It is first God's grace which is apprehended, understood, accepted by our faith. We might see the need of human forgiveness as a means of beginning to put wrongs to right.

But is all this talk of God's forgiveness relevant today? Does modern humanity even seek a gracious and forgiving God? Is the modern question more likely to be "is there a God at all?" Some people say we need to make people aware of themselves as "sinners" before they can hear the Gospel. But too often we sound negative or judgemental, speaking a religious language neither understood nor welcomed by the wider society. Such was the way Cardinal Pell dealt with New South Wales members of Parliament this week.

I much prefer the way Nathan deals with David and Jesus deals with the Pharisees. Both told a story with a simple judgment and, in both cases, the message of simple right and wrong is clear. They let the questions sit with their hearers.

On the other hand, there was the way Jesus dealt with the woman. She may not have even been aware that the issues that troubled her were also issues of concern to God. Sometimes we are called to make the connections for people.

Jesus could have been like the others who objected to her display. Instead, he let her get her feelings out. He defended her against her detractors. He affirmed her loving action. He declared her to be a sinner, but one whose sins are forgiven. He affirmed her faith, confused and fragile though it may have been. He sent her away with the blessing of peace.

Forgiveness is not about simply ignoring the sin. It's about dealing with the reality of human failure, and being able to grow through it, and to move forward. We need each other's help to do that.

There is very little "God language" in the story, but there is plenty of human activity that speaks a Godly message of justice and forgiveness.