

# **"Big Question 3: Can I be forgiven?"**

**Sunday 25 January 2009  
Rev Brian Senior**

## **Readings:**

Exodus 2:11-25  
Psalm 67  
(Acts 9:1-22)  
Mark 2:1-12

## **Sermon**

This morning we come to our third Big Question in our series of Big Questions. We are looking at questions which arise, at least in part, out of the story of God's chosen people in the early chapters of the book of Exodus, but which are relevant to our own lives today.

Life confronts us with many questions ... questions about ourselves ... about life ... about the nature of God ... and some of these seem imponderable – but the truth is that if we are prepared to really look, we may discover that the Bible throws light on these Big Questions, often in unexpected ways.

The Bible is a much more earthy document than many people imagine. It deals with real people with real lives in circumstances that were real for them, and often common to many others at the same time and to us today. So, we can be surprised to discover that within the pages of Holy Scripture there are deep questions asked, and also deep answers given ... or we find at least hints towards answers, even to the deep and difficult questions with which we struggle today.

So today's Big Question is "Can I be forgiven?"

... but maybe you are thinking to yourself 'Forgiven for what?' or even 'I've not done anything wrong, so why should I need to worry about being forgiven?'

If that's what you are thinking, then it's time to take a reality check. Guilt is one of those things which is common to us all.

Some guilt, of course, is completely inappropriate:

- A classic response of young children whose parents divorce, is to believe that it must be something they themselves have done wrong that has driven one parent away.
- It is often found that women who have been abused have come to believe that they must have deserved it, or that they must have done something to provoke it.
- Some people are sufficiently skilled at manipulating others that even when they have done their best, they may be left feeling guilty for what they have failed to do ... for not being the perfect wife or husband, or parent or child.

We ought not to feel guilty for that which it is not in our power to change.

But there is a guilt which is absolutely appropriate ... when by our selfish choices or lack of compassion we have failed other people ... when we have rebelled against the

guidance God has given us in the Scriptures about how we should live our lives ... when we have chosen self over sacrifice ... greed over generosity ... sin over holiness ... convenience over truth ... or pleasure over responsibility.

We went to see the film "Boy in the Striped Pyjamas" last week ... the advantage of reaching a certain age and being eligible for the Senior Screen at the Odeon.

In case you haven't read the novel or seen the film, I won't tell you too much ... but it tells the story of a friendship between a German boy whose father is promoted to be the Camp Commandant at Auschwitz, and a Polish Jewish boy who is imprisoned in the concentration camp ... all seen through the uncomprehending eyes of a nine year old.

Bruno meets Shmuel when his is out exploring in forbidden territory, and they strike up a friendship through the barbed wire fence of what Bruno believes to be 'the farm'. One day, Shmuel is brought to the Commandant's house to clean the glasses for a party, because his fingers are so small ... and Bruno discovers him at work in the kitchen. Bruno gives him some food, but when when of the soldiers catches him eating, Shmuel is in serious trouble.

Shmuel tells the soldier that it is alright, because his friend Bruno gave him the food, but Bruno is so frightened that he denies ever having met him. The next time Bruno sees Shmuel, his face is cut and bruised where he has been beaten. Bruno is overcome by his shame for letting his friend down, and the guilt drives him not only to apologise, but to try to help Shmuel in a way which I won't explain ... you really ought to go and see the film!

Bruno needed forgiveness, and he could only be free of guilt when Shmuel forgave him.

Guilt needs to be deal with ... because it cannot go away on it's own.

Deep down, we are all aware of failures in our lives ... of attitudes and actions of which we are ashamed. We are glad that no-one else can see into our minds and know what we are thinking ... and yet there is someone who knows! God sees our every action, and knows our innermost thoughts. He is the one:

"to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden"

The simple answer to that is that we are all in need of forgiveness, from those who are ever conscious of some gross sin in their lives, to those who have done everything in their power to live good, clean, and godly lives. The scriptures say:

*"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."*

... and if everyone is guilty, then so is everyone in need of forgiveness. And that included you and me.

The fact is that even the great heroes of faith turned out to have feet of clay:

- Noah got drunk and made an exhibition of himself.
- Abram fathered the child of his wife's servant.
- Isaac pretended his wife was his sister, in order to protect himself.
- Jacob deceived his father, robbed his brother, and then got cheated himself.
- Joseph was a spoiled brat who came to be hated by his brothers.
- Moses was a murderer who ran away to hide ... but more of that later!

- Gideon was a coward, hiding in a winepress from Philistines until God sent an angel.
- Samson was a womaniser who visited prostitutes, and was unable to resist the charms of Delilah, the Philistine femme fatale.
- David became an adulterer who had his mistress' husband killed in battle so that he could marry her.
- Solomon was supposed to be the wisest man on earth, but he drifted into idolatry.
- Zacchaeus was a Tax Collector who fiddled the books to get rich.
- Peter was a failure, because he pretended not to know Jesus when he most needed him.
- Thomas was a doubter who wouldn't believe in the resurrection of Jesus.
- Paul was a cruel persecutor of the Church, putting Christians in prison or even to death.

... and yet God chose to use them all.

Every individual through whom God has ever worked has been a sinner just like you and me, and yet God has chosen them to be his own ... loved them as his children ... and worked through them in order to advance his kingdom.

So consider Moses, as we read about him in the second half of Exodus Chapter 2.

Here is a man who was born a Hebrew, when the Hebrews were slaves in Egypt. He was born at a time when Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt, had decreed that every male child born to the Hebrews was to be thrown into the River Nile and drowned ... a severe form of 'ethnic cleansing' devised to keep the numbers down, for fear of a rebellion.

Moses' mother, determined to save him, and prompted by God, had made a papyrus basket and coated it with tar and pitch to make it waterproof ... like a tiny ark ... and placed her son in it and launched it on the waters of the Nile, among the reeds at the water's edge ... and trusted what followed to the mercy of God.

Pharaoh's daughter, coming to the river to bathe, heard the cries of the baby in the basket, sent her slave girl to fetch it, and decided to keep the boy alive. She sent Moses' quick-witted big sister Miriam to fetch a wet nurse, and Miriam fetched her mother, so that Moses was raised in his early days among his own people, and within his own family, until he was taken to the Egyptian Court to be raised as a Prince of Egypt.

God had his hand on Moses ... he saves him from almost certain death, and then puts him in a position within the Royal Household, giving him every possible opportunity to influence the situation of the Hebrew slaves for the better. As the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter, he might conceivably have become Pharaoh himself in due course, and could have set the Hebrews free.

So what does he do? ... he murders an Egyptian!

Of course we could argue that he was acting out of righteous anger ... reaching out to protect his fellow-Hebrews ... standing up for justice for the downtrodden slaves ...

... except that Moses knew full well that murder was abhorrent to God. It was the very first crime after the Garden of Eden, when Cain killed Abel out of jealousy .. and it had dire consequences. God has never taken the death of his children lightly.

Rather than helping his suffering people, Moses had potentially made their situation far worse - even burying the body in the sand would lead to suspicion and possible

retribution - and once he realised that he had been seen, Moses made a run for it ... to Midian.

There wasn't much Moses could do in Midian ... so here the great Egyptian Prince settled down to a life of sheep-rearing ... married Zipporah, a local girl, and started a family ... and so Moses slipped into obscurity for forty years, until he was eighty years old. (see Acts 7)

So here was a man on whom God had had his hand from the very beginning, but who had very seriously messed up. God could have decided that Moses was more trouble than he was worth, and left him to languish in Midian ... but God still had a plan and a purpose for him ... he was willing to forgive him, and to help him start again.

Moses was to have forty years to reflect on what he had done, before God called him ... and more of that next Sunday. Most of us do not have the luxury of forty years to get ourselves sorted out ... and God in his mercy often works to a shorter timescale. If there are ways in which we have failed God ... through ignorance, through weakness, or by our own deliberate fault ... he offers us forgiveness through Jesus and the way to start again.

Today, as it happens, is the day when the Church remembers the Conversion of St Paul - if you want to read all about it, take some time later to read Acts Chapter 9 - but to sum up, Paul, who was previously known as Saul, was a deeply committed Pharisee and an enemy of Jesus. He was so committed to being a good Jew, and to crushing the Christian faith, that he went from place to place arresting Christian believers, taking them as prisoners to Jerusalem, and even having them killed.

Saul obtained permission from the High Priest to go to Damascus to continue his crusade, when he had an amazing encounter with the Risen Lord Jesus. A light from heaven flashed around him, he fell to the ground, and heard Jesus speaking to him, saying:

*"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"*

Temporarily blinded, Saul was taken to Damascus where he was visited by Ananias, a Christian believer sent by God, somewhat reluctantly, to pray for him. Saul received his sight, and came to faith in Jesus. He was baptised, and became perhaps the greatest preacher and teacher the Church has ever known ... more commonly known by his alternative name of Paul.

Despite the terrible persecution Saul had inflicted on the first Christians, who were very fearful of him, Paul was forgiven by God and welcomed into the Christian family. He never forgot his past ... he said of himself:

*"For I am the least of the apostle and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am ..."*

(1 Corinthians 15:9f)

... and to his friend Timothy, Paul wrote:

*"Here is a trustworthy saying, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - of which I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life." (1 Timothy 1:15f)*

Paul's story makes the situation plain, you see. No-one can come to God by right ... none of us is good enough by our own merits ... but because of the amazing love of Jesus we can be forgiven, whatever we might have done, and so receive God's gift of eternal life.

People often think like that, don't they? They think that they don't need to be forgiven because they are good ... that because they are kind to old ladies and live a decent life they are OK with God. On the other hand, there are those who think they are too bad to be forgiven ... that because they have messed up their lives they don't deserve it.

Both extremes are wrong. It doesn't matter where you think you might be on this imaginary scale of goodness. The Bible says "*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*" ... and it is only through Jesus that we can be forgiven and start again ... only through Jesus.

And then we have the story of the paralysed man, in Mark Chapter 2.

Jesus was in Capernaum, on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. This was very much his 'home territory', after he moved his base there from Nazareth, where the locals had tried to throw him over a cliff. The place where he was teaching was crowded, and when these four loyal friends brought the paralysed man to him, there was no way to get in.

We can use our imagination a little to picture the scene ... the bright idea that one of them had to go up on the roof and make a hole .... the possible displeasure of the homeowner at having his roof wrecked ... the crowd below sputtering as the dust and debris rained down on them, and their surprise as this man was lowered down, right in front of Jesus.

Quite a dramatic entrance, to say the least!

... but nothing compared with what was to follow!

Jesus had been preaching ... Mark doesn't mention whether he was healing at the time, but the intention of the friends would have been completely obvious. They had come believing in his power to heal, and having real compassion for their friend, they were desperate for Jesus to do something. But Mark says that "*when he saw their faith*", he said to the Paralytic, "*Son, your sin are forgiven.*"

Interestingly, Mark tells us about the shocked indignation of the Teachers of the Law, who labelled Jesus a blasphemer for claiming the rights of God by daring to forgive sins ... but he doesn't tell us the reaction of the friends, or of the paralysed man himself!

Were they disappointed?

- this isn't what we came for!
- can't you make him better, Jesus?
- what's he done wrong anyway?
- there's not much opportunity for sinning when you can't even move!

But Jesus knew what this man really needed.

Perhaps his paralysis was a consequence of some sin, directly or indirectly.

Perhaps not.

Sometimes our sicknesses are related to sin in our lives ... sometimes there is no direct connection, other than the general principle that all sickness and disease is a result of the fact that sin entered the world when mankind chose disobedience and rebellion instead of walking faithfully with God.

It is not likely that this man was any more to blame for his condition than anyone else. The consequences of sin affect us all, but usually we cannot relate one specific consequence to one particular sin. Even so, what this man needed, even more than physical healing, was the freedom of forgiveness and the opportunity to be right with God.

This is what we all need, more than anything else ... forgiveness of our sins, and a renewed and restored relationship with God through Jesus. This is why he came, and this is what he offers to each one of us ... whatever we may have done in the past ... whatever sin may have touched our lives ... we can be free of it all, and start again.

Jesus healed the paralysed man as well ... bringing praise and glory to God from all those who were present. We don't know what sins the Paralytic may have committed, but Jesus showed by his actions that he had the authority to forgive them all ... and he has the same authority to forgive us our sins.

If God could forgive Moses, and use him to lead his chosen people ...

If God could forgive Paul, and use him to take the gospel to the Gentiles ...

If God could forgive the Paralysed man, and restore him to health and wholeness ...

.... then we must believe that God can forgive us, whatever we might have done.

Since God offers us his forgiveness, how are we to respond?

The last verse of the hymn we are going to sing in a few minutes ends with these words:

*"Feel for the lonely heart, conscious of sin, Which longs to be pure but fears to begin."*

Sometimes the person we find it hardest to forgive is ourselves ... somehow we feel that we deserve to suffer, and we hold on to our guilt and nurture it, afraid of what a new beginning might mean. But if forgiveness is a gift, then we need to receive it as a gift – with deep gratitude and humility – and allow Jesus to set us free.

PRAYER ~ to confess our sins and receive the forgiveness of Jesus.

But there is one more thing we need to consider. If forgiveness is a gift to us from God, then it is also a gift to be shared.

It is not good enough to accept that we are forgiven, unless we are also willing to forgive one-another ... keeping in mind what Jesus taught us to pray in the Lord's Prayer:

*"Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us."*

God calls his Church to be a community of forgiveness, of healing, and of restoration.

If we refuse to forgive those who have hurt us, then we frustrate the purposes of God, and damage the Body of Christ. It may be that we need to take positive steps, not only to forgive, but to demonstrate that forgiveness to another person ... by taking

positive steps to restore a broken relationship, and releasing one-another from the hurt.

PRAYER ~ to ask for God's help to forgive others, and to release them from their guilt.

I chose this next hymn ... "*Christ's is the world in which we move.*" ... in recognition that there are many people within the Church and within the community whose lives have been touched by all sorts of pain, but that Jesus calls us to be a place of healing and forgiveness, in which the touch of Jesus restores the broken and brings us to wholeness.

So, take note of the Chorus ... and let us sing this hymn as a prayer:

*"To the lost Christ shows his face;  
To the unloved he gives his embrace:  
To those who cry in pain or disgrace,  
Christ makes with his friends a touching place."*