

Eleventh Sunday of the Year June 12, 2016

2 Samuel 12:7-10, 13; Galatians 2:16, 19-21; Luke 7:36-8:3

Forgiveness is divine and it makes us truly the children of God. God is the Good Shepherd who goes in search of his lost sheep and when he finds the one that is lost carries it back to the original shelter. This message is given to us in all the three readings of today. The Gospel of today contains striking story of a woman, probably a known sinner and presented only by the Evangelist Luke, who comes in search of Jesus to wash his feet and anoint them with precious oil. She had come to Jesus understanding her own need to forgiveness and to seek spiritual healing. Jesus shows his true concern for the person and the woman receives forgiveness for her sins for her generous and courageous act. The first reading leads us to understand the weakness of men and the abounding generosity of God who goes out of the way to forgive a sinner. David's repentance leads him to forgiveness. We have the story of King David who sinned grievously against God and showed his ingratitude to the person of God who had been so generous to him. Now God in his generosity forgives him. St Paul in the second reading tells us that our sins have been taken away and we are justified in our faith. We enter into the divine realm by this experience of faith, forgiveness and healing

In today's First Reading, we learn about the infinite mercy of God and the weakness of human nature even of a person who has a high status in society and who is responsible to God for his people. At the same time we learn that if an individual sincerely repents of his sins, God can and will forgive him of all his sins. Prophet Nathan proceeds to review for David all the gifts he received from God. It was God who honoured him with the title of a King, yet David abused such a privilege. God had protected David from all harm and even then David did not respond to the love he received. The Prophet reminds him that God always seeks to call us back to faithfulness and fidelity to Him. Such is manifested by the grace of God. Without it, we could never repent and reconcile with God when we sin. Here we have King David chosen by God to be the King of Israel and his representative before the people. However, David sins against God by committing adultery and to cover up this sin he commits murder. The prophet tells him that he will be punished for the sins committed by him. At this juncture David realizes his fault and confesses that he has sinned against God. He displays the noble side of his character by immediately admitting his sin against the Lord. Even though he shows his weakness he also shows his faith and God forgives him. The prophet informs him that his life will be spared and God will not punish him.

The Second Reading Paul tells the Galatians that faith in Jesus Christ makes them right with God. Faith is the recognition that we cannot save ourselves. It is total surrender to Christ who alone can unite us to God. When Paul says that a person is not justified by the works of the law, he is referring to the Mosaic Law and all its ceremonies, the different kinds of animal sacrifices and offerings for the forgiveness of sins. With the arrival of Jesus, the Mosaic Law became obsolete. No one could be saved by performing the works of the law, the ceremonial sacrifices of animals. Paul appealed to the conviction that was shared by him and Peter at the time of their conversions. He uses a startling image to describe his life in Christ. By faith and Baptism, he experienced dying with Jesus on the cross in a mystical way. Paul realizes that his life in the flesh continues, but he has also been transformed by his faith in Christ "who has loved me and gave himself up for me." When Paul referred to justification by faith, he was making reference to

the necessary attitude of a person that includes the acceptance of the Divine revelation made known through Christ and the necessity for the individual to respond to it. This new status of justification of the Christian was not achieved because of good works; it was only made possible for him through his crucifixion with Christ. Thus when we are baptized, our faith transforms us and we become one with each other in the Body of Christ. Once a person becomes the member of the Body of Christ, then there are no social or religious distinctions, such as male or female, young or old, rich or poor.

Today's Reading from the Gospel of Luke gives us a powerful story about love and forgiveness. When Jesus is invited to the home of a Pharisee named Simon, the Saviour of men finds himself at a crucial point in his life as God made Man. Indeed, Jesus will show all the guests present that, if he is there with them, it is for this reason: to forgive sins. He had said this about himself that he had not to call the righteous, but sinners. (Mt. 9:13) Moreover, the guests' response to this is clear, for they are surprised by what Jesus accomplishes before their eyes: Jesus said to her that her sins are forgiven. Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, about his authority to forgive sins. In this crucial moment in the life of Jesus, a protagonist enters his life, and not one of the least of them: Mary, she who would be called Mary Magdalene, or Mary of Magdala. She will similarly be invited, by divine Providence, to intervene in just as important a way in just as crucial a time in the life of Lord: on the morning of the Resurrection. A crucial moment par excellence: indeed, it is at that moment that Mary Magdalene will announce to the Apostles and disciples gathered together at the Cenacle that Jesus is resurrected. It is still a crucial moment, for on the evening of Passover, Jesus will tell the Apostles: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." (Jn. 20:22-23)

In the Gospel Luke places before us a touching event concerning the penitent woman. The setting is a formal dinner to which Jesus is invited by a Pharisee to eat with him at his house. In consideration of the fact that the Pharisees usually displayed animosity towards Jesus, it was courteous for this Pharisee to show hospitality by inviting Jesus to dinner. Everyone attending the dinner would be ritually clean and would have expected the traditional gestures of hospitality to be shown before the meal: kiss of peace, washing of hands and feet and anointing the head with oil. During the meal a woman simply known as sinner and Luke refuses to name her, comes forward as it appears to anoint the feet of Jesus with fragrant myrrh. She would have known Jesus and would have heard of his compassion. At the same time she dared the wrath of the Pharisee as she entered the house. She wanted to show respect to the master and does it in her ordinary way. But as she leaned over, tears gushed forth, which fell on the feet of Jesus and the woman carefully wiped them away with her long hair. Completely overcome with remorse and sorrow, she repeatedly kissed his feet. This story in fact of a penitent sinner forgiven by Christ is but one of the many incidents which occurred but not narrated in the Gospels. Jesus was accused by his enemies of associating himself with the sinners and tax collectors. Jesus himself does not deny this accusation but says openly that he came for the sick that needed a doctor to heal them.

Simon the host of the meal is shocked by all this and concludes that certainly Jesus could not be a prophet to allow such behaviour to go unchecked. While Simon silently condemns Jesus the Master proves Himself to be a prophet by reading the secret thoughts of Simon. Jesus cleverly

tells a riddle that actually describes what had just happened at the meal but no one catches on. He presents the parable of the two unequal debtors to Simon before the entire audience, asking him, who is master's beloved when both are forgiven. Simon answers correctly indicating the higher value of the exemption. Then Jesus turns the table by pointing out how Simon had failed in the common gesture of hospitality while the woman carried them out perfectly. Then comes the greatest shock of all. Jesus proclaims that the woman's sins are already forgiven even before she had come in. Jesus says: "Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven as she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." The verse "She has shown great love" has been a classic text for showing that perfect charity has the power of forgiving sins. Jesus shows that in our life, love and forgiveness is closely associated. The woman loved Jesus because her sins were forgiven, not that she was forgiven because she loved Jesus. Jesus makes it clear that great love springs from a heart that is forgiven and cleansed.

The woman had been forgiven by Jesus even before she came to the place where meal was being held and she was determined to pay homage to the one who forgave her many sins and thereby opened up her capacity for greater love. Jesus on the other hand refused to get in the way of her show of love. He did not give any explanation for the act of the woman and he was not going to interfere with it. This indeed is a really extraordinary story. To appreciate this one has to enter into it and be really present with all one's senses active. What come across are the amazing composure and inner security and freedom of Jesus during the whole episode. He shows absolutely no signs of being uncomfortable or embarrassed. The reason is that he knows what the woman is doing and is not worried about how others might interpret it. Turning to the woman at his feet, Jesus says, "Your sins are forgiven." It is more a statement of something already a reality than words of absolution. The guests at table begin to ask each other: "Who is this that he forgives sin?" Again Jesus says to the woman, "Your faith has made you whole again. Go in peace." Let us admire Jesus' ability to focus totally on the woman and not be self-conscious about the other people around.

One thing very striking in the Gospel of today is that Jesus neither judged, nor rebuked the woman as the Pharisee expected. Instead, he welcomed her. This approach goes against the ways of the world. It seems like an unusual practice to judge and condemn the actions of others. We are asked to model love instead of judging, to welcome instead of rejecting. Those who come in contact with Jesus, they manifest one of two behaviours; they are either attracted to Him or repelled by Him. If they are like Simon, they appear to be doing good deeds in order to gain respect, honour, fame or wealth. These persons shun the company of sinners like prisoners, beggars, prostitutes, etc. By doing so, they neglect to give sinners the help that they need to find healing and wholeness. We see the opposing attitudes of Simon and the woman clearly shows that we can either accept or reject the mercy of God. Simon viewed himself as an upright Pharisee, displaying an attitude of having no need for love or mercy. His self-sufficiency prevented him from acknowledging his need for the grace of God.

A sinner among sinners, Mary Magdalene was greatly loved by Jesus. How could it have been otherwise? But when Jesus loves a sinner, it is not the man or woman whom Jesus loves primarily: it is first and foremost his Father whom Jesus loves through that man or woman. For Jesus, all men and women on earth are but creatures destined to love his Father and to manifest to all the Love he has for his Father in Heaven! This is why, on the morning of Easter, Jesus

avoids any contact with Mary Magdalene, giving his absolute preference to his Father, saying: "Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father." Mary, the Mother of Jesus, followed the same path as her Son. Indeed, she imitated him, while preceding him in time, having contemplated in advance, in the Old Covenant, the unique model who is the Saviour of men! Thus Mary also loved God above all, in loving he who became her mystical Spouse, the Holy Spirit, during the Incarnation of the Word. Mary loved God throughout her life, remaining a Virgin before, during, and after having brought into the world the Child Jesus. Mary gave herself to God from the first instant of her existence, enlightened and strengthened by the fullness of grace in her.

Jesus loves sinners; he does so to love his Father in them and through them. Jesus loves his Father in us and through us because we are but creatures. Now, a creature is a means, that is to say a being at which one must not stop, a being solely destined to the attainment of an end, an end that is God, the one and only supreme end. In this sense, even if Jesus loved Mary Magdalene very much, it is his Father and solely his Father that Jesus loves in her, and through her. Let us look into ourselves humbly at our incompleteness, sinfulness, failure and even refusal to forgive. Perhaps Jesus accepted an invitation to the house of the Pharisee so that he would have an opportunity to show that he had an opportunity to forgive sins. It makes us persons aware of the forgiveness of God and he will forgive us the moment we choose to love him. The opposing attitudes of Simon and the woman clearly show that we can either accept or reject the mercy of God. Simon viewed himself as an upright Pharisee, displaying an attitude of having no need for love or mercy. His self-sufficiency prevented him from acknowledging his need for the grace of God. The woman showed herself a humble penitent who could deeply love God and secured her forgiveness.

India's great Poet Rabindranath Tagore tells us about his own life story. One morning his servant did not turn up for work. The servant seemed as if he was out the whole night and the door was open and the water from the well was not drawn. Breakfast was not ready and water for his bath as not prepared. Hours went by and there was no sign of the man at all. Tagore was getting more and more angry. He wanted to plan out proper tongue lashing for the man. As soon as he turned up it was late and Tagore shouted at him at the top of his voice. He told him why he should not be dismissed. The man looked at Tagore; his eyes were red and filled with tears, his clothes filled with sweat. He bowed his head and in a husky voice told him that he was out because his little daughter died the previous night. He had just buried her and had come to look after the master. Then without any further word he went back to his work. Tagore remained dumbfounded and ashamed.

Fr. Eugene Lobo S.J. Bangalore, India