

REFLECTION FOR ADVENT 3 - MARSEILLE CHAPLAINCY 2018

Forgiveness – the message of John the Baptist.

One of the Bible verses that has kept me pondering for many months this year is the one from Zechariah's song when his son John was born.

*And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,
to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins. (Luke 1: 76-77)*

John's message was to repent, to give the people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins. So how do we know we are saved? By being forgiven! But how do we know we are forgiven? By being saved!

It feels a bit like a chicken and egg situation – which comes first? Forgiveness or salvation?

There is some help in the story of the healing of the paralyzed man in Mark's Gospel (Chapter 2:1-12). I am sure you remember the story. Because the crowds were so great four friends had to break through the roof of the house where Jesus was teaching and lowered their paralyzed friend on his mat into the presence of Jesus. Jesus told the sick man that his sins were forgiven (controversial for the Pharisees because only God can forgive sins – but then Jesus is God of course). Jesus then told the man to "Get up, take your mat and go home." And he did just that, got up and went home! The paralyzed man was forgiven AND healed, completely restored. He must have known he was "Saved". For him forgiveness had unlocked the door to healing. He indeed had "knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of his sins". (Interestingly 'healing' and 'salvation' have the same root word in greek).

The incarnation is God's way of showing his amazing gift of forgiveness. He was willing to send his only Son into our mess and give us the opportunity to begin again in full relationship with Him. This happens through the sacrificial offering of his Son Jesus on the cross. By forgiveness can we have that new beginning. John the Baptist called people to repent so that they might receive God's forgiveness and be reconciled to Him. This can only happen through Jesus. God's forgiveness of us sets in motion a circle of grace that we are called to live by. In the Lord's Prayer we are taught to say "Forgive us our sins as we forgive others" and that is not easy because forgiveness is not a natural human virtue. Our human reaction when we are hurt, abused or mistreated is to react angrily or even violently.

F.B.Meyer described **forgiveness as "an exotic which Christ brought with him from heaven."** Forgiveness is not achieved merely by words being offered or pronounced but by a genuine change of heart. This change has to come through the gift of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives. The scary part is that if we refuse to forgive others then we stop the circle of grace and jeopardise our own forgiveness and possibly even our health, not to mention our relationships with others.

Part of our Advent preparation for Christmas might be to check who we might need to forgive and to ask Jesus for the grace to forgive them and to pray for them.

This is the third of four reflections for each week of Advent. I pray that they will be a blessing to you. Sue Goodwin (One of the Interim Chaplains!).