

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Year A – September 11, 2011
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The Lord Be With You

Today, we remember the horrific events that enfolded on our country and how these events touched the very fabric of our lives. And we wonder how can our liturgy in the face of this tragedy make an impact on how we live our lives?

Scattered throughout the Mass are some simple yet profound words, “The Lord be with you.” From a biblical perspective this is no ordinary greeting. This is not like an exchange of “Good morning”, with the people responding, “And good morning to you Father”. For if we truly understood what these words mean we might approach the liturgy with greater respect.

On a basic level, these words convey the reality of Jesus’ presence within those who are assembled here in his name. For as we heard in last weeks gospel from Matthew, “where two or more are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst”.

Yet, this liturgical greeting also expresses the profound reality of God’s life dwelling within our very heart and soul by virtue of our baptism. With these very words, the priest is praying that the divine life we have received by virtue of our baptism may continue to grow within us.

But the greeting “The Lord be with you” goes even deeper in that it recalls for us the words spoken to a whole roster of heroes from the Bible who were called by God to a daunting mission – a mission that stretched the individual far beyond their “comfort zone” and forced them to rely on God as never before. For the future of God’s people was dependent on how well this individual answered the call and played their part. Think of Isaac (Gn 26:3,24), Moses (Ex 3:12), Joshua (Jos 1:5,9), Jeremiah (Jer 1:6-8), and even the Blessed Virgin Mary (Lk 1:28). All of them heard this message at pivotal moments in their lives. When God called someone in this way, either he or his angels addresses the person with the assurance that, “The Lord is with you.”

God doesn't send them to leadership training or a Toastmaster's conference for public speaking. Rather God gives them the one thing they need most: the assurance of his presence in their challenging mission.

So what is our challenging mission on this the weekend of September 11th that we need the reassurance of his presence with us?

In today's Gospel we hear that our forgiving has to be unlimited, because God's mercy is unlimited. By our forgiving without limit, we join in God's creative activity of bringing his mercy into the world.

This leads me to a cute story about a businessman who wanted to hire a new employee. The man devised a simple test for screening potential applicants for the job. He asked this simple question: How much is two plus two?

The first applicant was an accountant and when he was asked the question, replied, "The answer is exactly 4."

The second applicant was an engineer and, before answering the question, the man applied several mathematical formulas, used his calculator and replied, "The answer is 4.00193."

The third applicant was a lawyer. When asked, "How much is two plus two? The lawyer thought for a moment and then asked, "How much do you want it to be?"

So today my friends in Christ, I submit to you that the lawyer's response comes closer to the correct answer to the question raised in today's Gospel, "How often must I forgive?"

You see Peter's suggested answer – "as many as seven times" is more like the answer given by the accountant and the engineer: a carefully calculated, definite, limited number. Had Peter been thinking more like a lawyer he would have said, "What do you want the answer to be, Lord?" Jesus' answer clearly implies an infinite number – "seventy seven times" or as other translations say, "seventy times seven."

Yet as hard as forgiving others is; it is not a sad task. Rather it is a joyful; not pleasurable, but joyful task. Joyful because in forgiving from the heart, we release God's mercy into a world, badly in need of mercy. True forgiveness, the forgiveness that brings us joy, comes from the heart because that my friend is where God is. In the deepest, innermost part of our being is where we find God.

You see only God can forgive. This act of mercy is shown to us from the cross when Jesus says, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” That is why we say only God can really forgive. When we tap into the divine pool of mercy, which is God dwelling in our hearts, then it is God’s mercy that flows out of us. It flows out to those around us, renewing relationships, creating peace, making small miracles, giving hope. Forgiveness, the releasing of God’s mercy into a world badly in need of his mercy and it is something only we can do. God is dependent on us for this important task. Only God can forgive; but only we can make it happen.

So how do we reach that pool of mercy God has placed in our hearts? And how are we able to release God’s mercy to others? We do it by coming to realize that we ourselves are always in need of mercy. That involves honesty and humility. When we are self-righteous, when we persist in habits of judging or condemning others, then we lose the ability to see our own need for mercy. We can become obsessed with the speck in the other person’s eye and forget the plank in our own. When we have the honesty to look at ourselves as God does, we see that the shortcomings of others are not much different from our own. Then and only then, are we able to enter that part of our hearts where mercy is found. Then and only then, are we able to release God’s mercy to those around us.

Joy!! Well it becomes the proof that we have forgiven from the heart. When our forgiveness is less than that, we feel no joy. Whereas, whenever we forgive from the heart, we experience the kind of joy spoken as Shakespeare says, “like gentle rain from heaven,” making it possible for new life to appear. Thus forgiving others becomes a divine act. And whenever we participate in divine activity, we experience joy.

As we remember the 10th anniversary of 9/11 there is perhaps no more important question than the one posed in today’s Gospel – How often must I forgive? Sometimes the horrors we suffer in our families, our communities and even in our nation may seem too great to allow for forgiveness. But if we are able to understand that we hold the key to unlocking God’s mercy into our world, then our forgiving others takes on new meaning. We (that is you and I) are the ones who will decide whether others will be healed by God’s mercy or whether hate and alienation will continue to rule our lives. Thus, God has placed in our hands a huge responsibility.

Today, we find ourselves filled with deep feelings from the events that unfolded 10 years ago today. But we must remember that we are one nation under a forgiving God. And our liturgy helps support us to be faithful in the challenging mission that God has entrusted us with; to be forgiving, with just five simple words. “The Lord be with you.”

It is my heartfelt prayer that as we approach the implementation of the New Roman Missal, we will all take a closer look at these words and the words said throughout the Mass and gain a greater understanding and appreciation of the words said within our liturgy.