

THE CONFESSION AND THE COMMISSION

(Psalm 103.1-12 and John 21.15-25)

I was very struck by the story of a lady called Eva Kor this week. [*With her twin sister she had been subjected to medical experiments at Auschwitz, and she was giving evidence at the trial of the camp record keeper, Oskar Groning*]. Eva had forgiven the Nazis for their crimes against her, and urged Oskar to repent and teach the horrors of the holocaust to his fellow Germans in the time he had left. Sadly, many of her fellow survivors thought she was wrong to forgive those perpetrators who hadn't confessed and repented first. And many people, including many Christians would agree with her. But they would be wrong.

Our reading from Psalm 103 makes that clear. We worship a God who is gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love, removing our transgressions from us. And that is how we should be too.

And when we look at our reading from John's gospel, we see the forgiveness of Jesus in action. Remember, at Jesus' trial Peter has let Jesus down by denying Him three times. Yet now Peter is the first out of the boat to meet Jesus: they have unfinished business to settle,

I take it as read that Jesus has unilaterally offered forgiveness to Peter. Because God, in his grace offers all of us forgiveness of our sins as a free gift. It's a free gift because we could never deserve it, and we could never earn it. What we need to do is accept it and respond to it with thanksgiving, with confession and repentance. [*Perhaps we get the liturgy the wrong way round by putting the confession before the absolution*].

But the whole business of forgiveness is a two way thing. The wronged person offers it, but for the whole process of forgiveness to be complete, the wrong-doer has to accept it, (if that's possible of course, it may not be). But unconditionally offering forgiveness is difficult and costly for us. It goes against the grain; it's not the way of the world.

And when we accept God's forgiveness, our relationship with God can be restored. And restoration of our relationship with a wronged person can

begin to be repaired as well, if they accept our offer of forgiveness, though it can be a difficult, lengthy and costly business.

But Jesus goes about healing his relationship with Peter in a rather unusual way. He asks Peter three times "Do you love me". (The correspondence between the three questions and the three denials in the courtyard has often been noted). And this time Peter's answer is not "no I don't know him", but "yes Lord, you know that I love you".

The right response to the free offer of forgiveness by Jesus is not just confession and repentance, but it's also to say to Jesus "I love you", just as Peter did. Saying thank you Jesus, I love you Jesus because you have freed me from by sin by dying for me on the cross. Saying thank you, I love you Jesus because you are offering me undeserved forgiveness.

So the conversation between Peter and Jesus has moves on from forgiveness to reconciliation and restoration of their relationship. But there's a further move.

At each confession of Peter's love for Jesus, Jesus replies "Feed my sheep" or "Feed my lambs". We're moving on from forgiveness and reconciliation, moving on to commissioning for service.

And the prime requirement for Christian service is that we love Jesus. Perhaps it's very obvious, but it's only too easy to forget. What we have to offer people is our love for Jesus. And without that spiritual base of love for Jesus we are in danger of burn-out and disillusion.

Now we could take the replies "Feed my sheep" and "Feed my lambs" as a command, but I rather see it as a necessary follow-on. How can you not be commissioned for some sort of service once you realise that you love Jesus?

Once you really get it. Once you really get what Jesus had done for you. Loving you so much that He died on the cross to save you from your sins, offering you the free gift of forgiveness.

That was certainly my experience. It took me a long time to “get it”, a long time to realise what Jesus had done for me. But once that realisation came, there was no other option than to put following Jesus first. It wasn’t a command, it was unavoidable.

So in this story we see the working out of forgiveness, reconciliation and re-instatement for Peter.

We see Jesus’ free offer of forgiveness for Peter. Just as we’re all offered the free gift of forgiveness, whatever sins we have committed. Just as Eva Kor offered it to the Nazis who wronged her with such evil. And just as we as Jesus’ followers should be offering it too.

We see Peter’s acceptance of the free gift of forgiveness, expressed in his love for Jesus. Just as we too need to accept the gift of forgiveness, in confession, repentance and thankfulness.

And we see Peter’s commissioning for service as an outworking of that love for Jesus. Even though he had grievously fallen short, he could still be restored for service. And the same goes for us too. Some think they aren’t good enough to be a Christian. To them I would say “you are the perfect material”.

And finally, I’d like to pay tribute to Susie Thorp, for the wonderful input she gave us on forgiveness while she was here during her curacy, and for introducing me to this very helpful book by Miroslav Volf called “Free of Charge”.