

Pentecost

All Jesus does is breathe on his disciples, saying: 'Receive the Holy Spirit.' There's nothing particularly miraculous about breathing; but the tongues of fire fifty days later certainly are mysterious; breathing is just natural. And yet that has something of the greatest importance to tell us about the gift of the Spirit and his effect on the way we relate to each other.

Not that the gift of the Spirit is natural to us, like breathing. Having the Spirit within you is entirely beyond our natural powers. Breathing, eating, drinking, and so on - all these things are natural to human life. But having the Spirit within you is of a higher order altogether. When Jesus sends the Spirit to the disciples, he accompanies it with a very ordinary sign - human breath. And the clue to the importance of this lies in the very next thing he says: 'If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

A community can be shaped in all sorts of ways. It can be shaped by enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, and so on. But it can also be shaped by love, joy, peace, patience, and the rest. Probably the communities we live in are shaped by a bit of both. And we too probably contribute a bit of both to what shapes the lives of our communities. But what is crucial to the life of any community is whether or not forgiveness is a fundamental value.

Jesus tells us that if we do not forgive the sins of others, we will not be forgiven. And which of us can say that he or she has not sinned? That then is the deal. And there is no better deal. Unless we forgive, we shall not be forgiven. And however difficult it may be for us to forgive the wrongs that may be done to us, the deal Jesus announces is good news for us, because every one of us will benefit, and without it not one of us can really hope.

Stay with forgiveness. This is the insight from the Resurrection. To believe in Jesus is to experience the forgiveness of sin, the risen victim of exclusions is forgiveness. Being wrong can be forgiven, it is the insistence on claiming to be right that brings us to having no need for forgiveness - I've done nothing wrong. God never refuses forgiveness - but we can refuse to accept it!

When we look at how our world has rebelled against God, we have to wonder how such a great mass of sin can be forgiven. And yet nothing is impossible for the Spirit who offers forgiveness to all. If the Spirit can forgive all this, then surely he can give us the power to forgive when we find it difficult or even impossible. When we sometimes feel that we don't have the natural power to forgive, the power to forgive is entirely natural to the Spirit. And when the Spirit comes to dwell in us, what is natural to him becomes second nature to us.

Forgiveness may sometimes seem even unnatural to us, but it is natural to a community formed by the Spirit, the only kind of community that can ultimately work in a sinful world. Without breath, the body dies. Without forgiveness the Church would die too, and so would hope. If we don't forgive, we die. But if we do forgive, God opens up a new life of possibilities before us, and hope for a life with him that will never die. Send forth you Spirit and we shall be created, and you renew the face of the earth.