

Easter 3.09

Some two or three years ago a murder caught our national attention. It was the murder of Amish children in their one-room schoolhouse. The man who murdered them had lost his mind and after killing the children killed himself. Like any murder it was horrible, but it was especially horrible because the victims were innocent children., How could anyone be that out of his mind that he would bind innocent children and then kill them, we asked ourselves.

But the aftermath of this murder was even more astonishing, and as uplifting as the murder was disturbing. After the children had been buried, their families went to the home of the murderer's widow to help her and her children in whatever way possible.

Well, we might say, they could distinguish between this woman and her deranged husband. But was that so easy to do? Would it not have been easier, yes, even more natural, to draw her into his ambit—after all she was his wife!—and simply forget about her, perhaps even hope that her own destroyed life and that of her own children would be a kind of payment, a kind of compensation for his crime and their own suffering and loss?

But these Amish families did not act this way, and, I am sure, fought against such evil thoughts of revenge against this widow. No, they knew that as Christians they had to forgive this murderer and be kind to his widow and his children. And they did so.

It is a remarkable story. It is a story of Christian forgiveness in action, its way of overcoming the hatred and revenge that can so easily take hold of our human hearts.

Today's readings present us with the source of this way of acting, the Lord himself. Jesus had been deserted and even betrayed by his closest followers. But now, after his resurrection, he appears to them and his first words to them are simply: "Peace to you." No recriminations. No accusations! No bitterness on Jesus' part. A simple greeting which includes but does not even mention the fact that he has forgiven them: "Peace to you."

In this scene from Luke Jesus tries to convince his astonished followers that he is one and the same with the person they knew. He shows them his hands and feet and invites them to touch him so that they can see that he is real and not just some kind of phantasm, some kind of ghost. Indeed, he even goes to the extreme of eating

something to prove his reality. But there is another way of knowing that this is the same Jesus. It is his way of thinking and speaking. When Jesus, the one deserted and abandoned by all in his hour of need, now simply says “Peace to you” to those who had abandoned and deserted him, then it should have been obvious to them that this is the Jesus they had known, that this is the Jesus who on the cross forgave those who had crucified him because they did not know what they were doing. Yes, this is the same Jesus. The crucified Jesus is identical with this Jesus who offers them forgiveness in and through that simple greeting: “Peace to you.”

And Peter, despite his weakness, despite his obtuseness, finally did learn his lesson. For now in Acts we hear him saying to those very men who had crucified the Lord, “Now I know, brothers, that you acted out of ignorance, just as your leaders did.” Like the Lord, he has learned to forgive.

We too must learn to forgive. Perhaps the hardest people for us to forgive are those who don't even realize that they have offended us and therefore don't ask for our forgiveness. Nevertheless, they have offended us. What do we do? We forgive them anyway, and

we do so for the same reason that Jesus and Peter forgave: they do not know what they have done.

We are also strengthened in our ability to forgive such people when we realize that their and our own sinfulness which caused Christ's suffering and death are part of God's plan, for we are told that Christ had to suffer. This was the Father's will for him.

In the end when all will be well, mercy will triumph and forgiveness will abound. So let us anticipate that end here and now in our lives, asking the Lord to give us the love and the strength we need in order to forgive others, even our enemies, and to accept our own being forgiven by God and our neighbor.