

Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

Whenever you hear those words read out in Church what word comes to your mind? The word that comes to my mind is that of power. It is a power that Churchmen have used down the years to bolster their position, their authority over their flock as they have asserted a power to include, power to exclude from fellowship, from communion.

Yet these are words on the lips of Jesus to his disciples as he greets them in the upper room on that first Easter night. What are we to make of them?

Let’s start with that initial gift of the Spirit And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. In the Revised Catechism one of the functions of the Spirit is to ‘Enable us to become more like Jesus’

More like Jesus, who when presented with a woman taken in adultery by a crowd intent on stoning her, said ‘Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.’ and to the woman ‘Woman, your sins are forgiven. Go and sin no more’

More like Jesus, who when Peter comes up and asks: "Lord, if a brother sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" ²² Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

To make the point he tells a story of a servant, forgiven a huge debt by his master that he could never hope to repay. He then turns on a fellow servant demanding instant repayment of a trivial amount, only to experience the full wrath of his master.

Then Jesus says: So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

What we are talking about here is hanging on to grievances, hanging onto resentments. That is not the way of Christ.

It is in this light I go on to think about what Jesus means when he talks about forgiving and retaining sins. For we do have a power; a power to hang onto resentments or to let them go. We all know of situations of long standing conflict in families, in communities.

There is something deeply debilitating about unresolved conflict, about cycles of recrimination, whether in families or in communities. In the course of the Northern Ireland conflict there were a series of ‘tit for tat’ killings in which innocent people on one side were killed to avenge the killing of someone on the other side. But there were those other occasions when people deliberately chose to break that cycle. Who out of their own experience of grief declared very publicly, ‘This must stop. Let no other family experience the pain that we are feeling now.’

So I have come to see those words of Jesus:

If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.

not so much in terms of authority given to grant or withhold forgiveness but rather as a simple statement of how things are – if I choose to forgive or not to forgive – if I choose to break the cycle or let hurt and resentment continue.

In that light, Jesus comes to us through the locked doors of the past. He is inviting us to unlock doors – to unlock doors of resentment, of regret, of prejudice – to enable new beginnings. In Christ, in death and resurrection, God makes new beginning in us. He invites us, he empowers us to be agents of his healing, reconciling, door opening love in the world in which we live and move and have our being.

There is another aspect to this that I want to think about. It is one thing to forgive another person – it is quite another to forgive ourselves. Which of us does not carry our own burdens of disappointments, of regrets of things done or left undone, the word spoken that we can never take back? The Risen Christ comes to us through the locked doors of our regrets and self recrimination and invites us to let go, to accept his healing, forgiving love.

Receive the Holy Spirit, receive the power to become more like Christ, allow the Risen Christ to minister to you.