

Psalm 103:8-14
Ephesians 1:3-10
Luke 15:11-32

Forgiveness

There is a definite Autumn feel to the air these days, especially first thing in the mornings. The football season has begun, the cricket season is beginning to wind down. Teachers and students will hardly need reminding that the new term starts this week. On the trees leaves are beginning to turn colour and it won't be long till the main task of our Wednesday morning volunteers in the churchyard will be leaf sweeping. And all this of course means that our summer sermon series on the Nicene creed is drawing to a close.

This week we are looking at the phrase "we acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins"; next week we look at resurrection and eternal life and in two weeks time we wrap it all up with a look back over the whole creed.

So today - **we acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.**

Lets start by thinking about forgiveness.

That gospel reading – the story of the prodigal son or the lost son – is probably the most famous story or parable that Jesus ever told. The story of a young son who wanted the good life; who wanted his share of his father's estate now. When he asked his father for this, he was, in the culture of the time, virtually wishing his father dead.

The young son who left his home with money in his hands, without looking back, without a second thought for the hurt and the pain he had caused. Who rejected all those who had nurtured him and loved him and cared for him over the years.

We know the story very well. We know of his high living; we know of the so called friends who enjoyed his company when he was wealthy but ditched him when things were hard. And we know of the money running out, the famine which came to the land, the hunger and the loneliness and, of course, the sorry sight of him feeding some pigs.

We know too of him eventually coming to his senses and thinking once more of his father and of home. But, I wonder, was he thinking of his father and reflecting on the hurt he had caused, or was it a more selfish thought about the possibility of him being fed and provided for? Whatever the motive, he resolved to go back home and to ask for forgiveness, not in the hope of being welcomed as a long lost son, but in hope of being hired as a servant, a hired hand, an employee.

But he got more than he could have hoped for. His father was waiting for him, looking for him and came running towards him, throwing his arms around him and rejoicing at him coming home. He would not be treated as a servant or employee, but would regain his place as a son, as a loved and honoured member of the family. Despite his pre-prepared speech "**I am not longer worthy to be called your son**" that is just what he became again. The father-son relationship, broken and torn apart by his selfish desires and actions, was now restored. As the father said "**this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!**"

The story tells us much about forgiveness. The traditional interpretation is of the father's welcome of the young son and love shown to him being seen as a picture of the way God welcomes us when we recognise our faults and return to him, asking for his forgiveness. The story then is a picture of God forgiving us and restoring our relationship with him. A picture of Grace – undeserved blessing.

But that is not the whole story.

The story also tells us of another broken relationship. The relationship between the father and his other son. We don't know the ins and outs of the relationship between father and older son, but it's clear that things were not right. The words the older son said to his father at the end of the parable make that point **"For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!"**

My reading is that the older son was jealous of his brother, and that the jealousy had been eating away at him over the years. Jealous that his brother had taken his inheritance early and left, jealous that he had worked hard over the years looking after the estate while his brother had been off enjoying himself, and now jealous because of the love his father had shown to his brother on his unexpected return.

And all this jealousy had blinded him to the love his father had shown him. And the sight of love being showered on his brother at his return, while he was unable to appreciate the constant love shown him by his father over the years was too much.

Perhaps the jealousy had turned almost to feelings of hate, both of his brother and his father. There seems to be no desire on the older son's part to change things; no recognition that it was his jealousy that was at the root of it all, no understanding that it was down to him to make the first move. And so the story ends with this broken relationship unrestored.

For relationships to be restored there has to be forgiveness, and for forgiveness there has to be a recognition that things are not right, a desire to put things right and an admission of responsibility. The younger son showed this, but the older son couldn't see past his own self justification.

So the second lesson we can draw from this story is that if hurts aren't addressed, if faults aren't recognised, admitted and dealt with, there can be no forgiveness and relationships can never be restored. This applies to human relationships, and also, of course, to our relationships with God.

Both these lessons teach us that forgiveness is not an end in itself. What forgiveness leads to is restored relationship. When we think of God forgiving us – as we asked him to do at the start of our service – the reason we do that is so that we can enjoy a loving and close relationship with him; with nothing standing in our way.

We heard some words from Psalm 103 this morning – words which rejoice in the forgiveness God offers us. ***as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us***

And those transgressions, those sins, those things we do wrong intentionally or unintentionally, together with the consequences of them are removed metaphorically both out of our sight and out of our reach. Again, this removal, this forgiveness is not an end in itself, but so that nothing can stand in the way of our restored relationship with God.

The parable talks of this in terms of personal relationships; the psalm hints at how this works for a community – the people of God in restored and renewed relationship. But the reading from Ephesians takes it all a step further; maybe a step wider would be a better way of describing it. Here we read about the whole creation being in restored relationship with God. This is a theme which comes in a number of places in the New Testament (often in Paul's letters), culminating of course in the vision of a new heaven and a new earth in Revelation.

We started this morning by thinking about forgiveness and we have seen that there has to be a desire for a relationship to be restored; this leads to an act of forgiveness and then to the restored relationship. This works on a human level – between people like you and me. The story of the lost son makes that clear, but that story also shows us what happens when things are not dealt with.

But it also works on the level of our relationship with God. We have to want a relationship with him, then the forgiveness we receive enables us to enjoy this new relationship. And this is, I believe, where the reference to baptism comes in in our credal statement **we acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.**

I have often pondered over **one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.** On one level it seems to imply that it is act of baptism that brings about forgiveness, but surely that cannot be right. Forgiveness comes from God, undeserved and unearned. We cannot earn forgiveness by being baptised.

What the thoughts we have had this morning help us see is that the important truth is that a desire for relationship leads to forgiveness from God which leads to that restored relationship with God. For us as individuals and for us as a community.

When we were baptised, when people are baptised (there is a baptism happening here this morning) the baptism is a sign of wanting to belong to a new community which is the community of people who are enjoying this new relationship with God. Towards the end of the baptism service we say to the newly baptised "We welcome you into the fellowship of faith; we are children of the same heavenly Father; we welcome you".

This desire to belong to what we might call the big family of God leads to forgiveness and then to new relationship in a new community of people – the church. Baptism is the outward sign of being part of that community, of us being in that new relationship with God. And this belonging to the new family is the outcome of the forgiveness we have received from God.

And so we can declare with integrity and honesty from the bottom of our hearts those words which are in our creed - **we acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.**