

We might put our question about forgiveness from God a little differently: What does it mean to be forgiven – to be in right relation to God – and still to be labouring under the effects of sin? To *this* framing of the question, the following answer can be put: to be living in right relation to God and yet also to continue to labour under the effects of sin, is to be living the life of the incarnate Son, Jesus. What else is the life of Jesus but that of a human being living in right relation to God? And what else is the life of Jesus – culminating and so *defined* in his death – but a life lived with the effects of sin?

We can say, then, that it *is* possible to be reconciled to God and yet still be *unreconciled* to those who have not forgiven us, simply because Jesus the incarnate Son lived precisely *this* life – our life. His was a life lived in full orientation to God. The fullness of this orientation *for us* is that which divine forgiveness brings; God does not “half” forgive. The life of Jesus was also lived in full orientation to the world and its lack of reconciliation within itself. Jesus lives fully oriented towards God – we might even dare to say, Jesus is “forgiven” – and yet still has enemies, is still *unforgiven* by the world.

“Christian forgiveness,” then, is not so much being “forgiven” our sin as simply being *given* – to put on as our own – the humanity of Jesus with its double orientation – to-and-from God and to-and-from the broken world.

Talk about Jesus as human and divine is not, then, abstract and groundless speculation on his nature or character. This “dogma” goes straight to the heart of the affirmation we happily make about forgiveness, and sadly make about the continued brokenness of the church and of the world and about our part in that brokenness. We need to be able to say how it is that we can speak of ourselves as *whole before God* – as restored, forgiven – knowing that we *continue in broken relationships*, with debtors and accusers who have no interest in whether God has “forgiven” us or not. To put the matter more “theologically”, we need to be able to say how *perfecting* divine action meets *imperfect* human actions. This is what the Christ-dogma does.

In fact, the church does not actually say *how* this is possible, for the *how* is a “mystery” – an impenetrable and yet clearly *given* thing. So the church says simply *that* the divine and human coincide. It says this *not* primarily in its dogma about the humanity and divinity of Christ; that comes later. What comes first, and gives rise to the dogma, is the declaration of forgiveness we dare to utter here every week. Here the church declares that it *is* possible that grace and ungrace can come together without confusion of the two, without the one changing the other, without radical division, without separation. Not only is it possible, it *has happened* in Jesus. And so, in one of its early councils (Chalcedon 451AD), the church declared what I’ve just said: that in Jesus the truly and holy divine meets the truly and broken human in the most intimate of ways, and yet “without confusion, without change, without division, without separation” of the divine and the human.

This sounds like hifalutin and so quite “optional” theological speculation but its *meaning* for us is that we can make a Christian declaration of forgiveness: you *are* forgiven by *God* for things you have done to people who have *not* forgiven you. It is the understanding of Jesus as the coming together of the divine and human which makes this affirmation possible. *If Jesus is “only human”, then God is unjust in forgiving us our sins.* Forgiveness from God, then, takes place to the extent that we are “in” Christ, to the extent that we become the Body of Christ: even if someone holds something against us, we can still receive forgiveness from God for whatever that thing is.

At the same time, this does not make the brokenness of our worldly relationships go away. The wholeness of the humanity of Jesus did not mean that the ongoing effect of broken human relationships did not continue. Jesus dies on the cross – fully in right relation to God, fully in the antagonism of being human. And we might expect the same for ourselves, one way or another. This is not necessarily “good” news, but it is *the* news of the gospel. It is the “cost” of forgiveness. Faith receives a gift of life in the shadow of death. The death will still come, but it will no longer *be* death to those who have received the lively gift.

What does all this mean? It means that the grace of God is not “cheap”. To receive forgiveness from God is to be called to suffer *unforgiveness* in the world.

Let us, then, confess our sin, receive the lively gift of forgiveness, and rise with the courage of freed souls to live *alive* in this antagonistic and broken world.

Amen.
