

St. John, XX, 21-23

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ST JOHN, XX, 21—23.

Pax vobis. Sicut misit me Pater, et ego mitto vos... Accipite Spiritum sanctum. Quorum remiseritis peccata, remittuntur eis, et quorum retinueritis retenta sunt.

There is perhaps no passage in the whole of the New Testament that presents more difficulties to the interpreter than this; that calls more urgently for patience and selfrestraint; or that requires more sympathetic acquaintance with St John's principle of recording our Lord's teaching.

Yet we cannot be content to leave it without explanation for our Lord's words were always spoken to illuminate our minds, not to mystify them; or if in any case the true sense be indeed beyond us, even so we must at least attempt to find it, for while it is conceivable that His words might be so exclusively designed to set us on a certain train of thought as to make their own essential purport a secondary matter, it is altogether inconceivable that, simply because we failed at first sight to understand a saying of His, we could without loss dismiss it wholly from our thoughts or retain it merely as a fetich formula. No word of His was idle, and what shall we say of one spoken to the assembled disciples as a first greeting after He had returned to them from the grave.

It is indeed St John alone who records this utterance, and St John throughout his narrative draws for our guidance no hard and fast line between the actual words spoken by our Lord (or their strict equivalent) on the one hand, and on the other a dramatic and condensed reproduction of their general sense, nay, or even the comments and expansions of himself the narrator, but there is nothing in all this to make us hesitate in acknowledging that in the brief and striking record

before us we have the very words addressed by the risen Jesus to His assembled disciples. One may pass from white to black by insensible gradations so that one cannot say that the white ends here or that the black begins there, but yet of a certain spot one may be sure that it is white; in the same way it seems at least to myself certain that St John has here preserved for us the ipsissima verba of our Lord, and that, the solemnity of the occasion of their utterance laying a double burden upon us, we dare not pass them by in silence. Naturally we must in the first place attend to the meaning of the terms used, and this most carefully, for the definitions from which we start are such a radical postulate of the whole interpretation that any departure from them, any inconsistency in their application will necessarily lead to most erroneous results. I call attention to this so markedly not because the definitions are likely in themselves to invite contradiction, rather on the other hand will they seem self-evident and even trite, but because great is the danger for the interpreter of disguising in haze the full meaning of his terms as he passes them through the critical gates of definition and so of obtaining no lawful entrance for them to the fields of application beyond. What then is sin? It is essentially alienation from, and even hostility towards God. Explain it if you will as a disease or even as an imperfection of the moral faculty, yet the moral faculty is not a mere physical organ, and we cannot, without ignoring or denying the fact of personal responsibility, hold that sin is other than what our conscience feels it to be, personal rebellion against God.

An *act* of sin may indeed be largely or wholly due to the ignorance or weakness of him who commits it, and so the element of personal enmity against God may be reduced to a minimum, but none the less the very imperfection that allows the act, the very want of spiritual discernment by which the sinner fails to shrink from it, shows that there is an evil gulf somewhere between him and his God, that there is hostility between his nature and God's nature; and without plunging into the metaphysics of personality, it is to be recognised that as far as it is correct to say that the man himself is acting, so far is he responsible for his act, and in the case of sin hostile to God.

Hostility between man and his Creator implies of course a great deal more than between man and man, it implies disease and degradation tending to death, and thus the term sin includes all these things; but yet they are not the root and essence of sin, they do not necessarily imply, in our abstract conceptions, any element of that personal responsibility which gives its distinctive and essential note to sin. The Christian's vision cannot stop short of God and sin will be acknowledged by him to be ultimately not merely against right principle, not merely against a neighbour, but also and above all against the Divine Personality and thus fitted to bring down the divine anger and displeasure upon the sinner.

Correspondingly, with regard to remission or forgiveness this personal aspect is the chief; forgiveness in its essence is the continuance or restoration of God's personal affection and favour for the sinner. Indeed so generally is this felt to be the first and proper sense of forgiveness, that we might have taken it as our base and then defined sin as being that which required forgiveness; but it is perhaps more secure against cavil to proceed as we have done.

As however there are by nature inevitable effects of sin which indeed are themselves included in that term, so there are additional elements in complete forgiveness.

Sin deserves penalty; Christ's sufferings may have shown to us, or may have won for us, and Christ's Spirit may whisper to us, that God will never inflict mere arbitrary penalty, but the sinner must admit that he deserves it; included then in forgiveness is the release from arbitrary penalty¹).

And again, as the sinful act is both a personal apostasy from the God of life and a breaking of the order of the universe, and can therefore result only in the death or misery of the sinner, so in forgiveness is included a merciful overruling, tempering, or guiding of the natural results of the sin, whether this be done by what in human speech we should call an interposition of the creating will, or by a law implanted in the universe itself whereby diseased and offending portions may

¹) This question of the deserts, as distinct from the results, of sin is of course a difficult one, but it would not be germane to the purpose of this article to enter into it.

through certain spiritual conditions ultimately recover health and even the full vigour of their original functions.

To sum up; forgiveness or remission of sins is in the first and essential respect the continuance or renewal of God's personal favour towards the sinner, and secondarily the release both from the penalty due to, and from the extreme results naturally flowing from the act of sin:—

And Jesus, risen from the dead, breathed on His disciples and said "Receive ye the Holy Spirit; whosoever sins ye forgive, they are forgiven, and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained".

The disciples here spoken of were undoubtedly the general body of the faithful few, and not the Apostles only, for while we could not press the term "disciples" as conclusive on this point especially in the gospel of S^t John, yet its use points in that direction, and would in any case forbid the building up of any theory that required for validity the assumption that no one outside the number of the Eleven was actually present; the assumption would be incapable of proof, and even if it were true in fact a theory based on it would leave untouched the consideration that the narrator felt no call to use the unambiguous term.

But indeed we know that there were others besides the Apostles present, for S^t Luke describes the persons then gathered together as being "the Eleven and those that were with them". Hence combining the two accounts we are sure both that the general body of believers was present and that there was no significant selection whatever of special persons to receive the sacred message which we are considering. It has been argued that, as we learn both from other considerations and from the opening passages of the Acts that the charge delivered to "the Apostles and them that were with them" had, in the matter of bearing witness to Christ, a special meaning for the Apostles in addition to that which it bore for the general body of the believers, so also in like manner the words preserved for us by S^t John may be specialised in like manner. This is quite conceivable a priori but yet, as in the one case so in the other, the special application must be deduced not simply from the general statement but from some strictly parallel passage, from the undisputed action of the Apostles; and in any case the

essential and all important interpretation of the charge will be found in its relation to those to whom we are told it was addressed.

One important result immediately follows, namely that any interpretation of our Lord's words which regards them as the bestowal of an official ministerial charge to the chief pastors of the Church as distinct from the laity is necessarily erroneous. Any official authority bestowed by the primary essential force of the charge would belong essentially to the whole body, so that the ministers who actually exercised this authority would do so as representing, and not as acting from the outside upon, the mass of the faithful. But the natural inference, much strengthened by considerations that will appear later, is already that no official commission at all, i. e. no commission apart from the realities of a man's own spiritual condition, is intended by our Lord. In agreement herewith we may now notice that St John habitually and markedly avoids all direct notice of outward form, even where such exists, in order that he may lay stress upon the reality of the inward lifegiving spirit in the individual independent of all external instruments and limitations. To appreciate the force of this it is not necessary to accept the exact description of the examples of his method which follow here, and therefore no time will be spent in justifying that description; it will be sufficient to note them and see in them a real tendency of the Evangelist in the direction stated.

While then the three Synoptists relate how our Lord appointed the outward rite of Baptism, St John does not, but instead describes how in converse with Nicodemus He uses the same figure in speech, which Baptism contains in act, calling attention directly to the inner truth rather than to its sacrament; not indeed precluding an intelligent application of His words to the latter, but yet directing our vision straight upward to the ultimate glory not so much through the sacrament as standing beside it. Even those who in the words to Nicodemus see a more direct reference to the rite of Baptism than this will not fail to recognise the total absence of any definite directions instituting a ceremony of the Church.

Again the great discourse of St John's VIth chapter describes the necessary condition of life as being the eating of Christ's

flesh and the drinking of His blood, but it is only in the other Evangelists that we find any mention of the actual sacrament of His body and blood which He appoints in the bread and wine of the Thanksgiving. As before St John portrays our Lord using in speech the same figure which, the other Evangelists tell us, He appointed in act as a sacrament; and no interpreter could deduce from St John's gospel alone that any such sacrament had ever been constituted.

Again, we could hardly learn from the Gospel of St John itself that the twelve chosen disciples were entrusted with a special and permanent responsibility in the affairs of the Kingdom. Without the fuller testimony of the other evangelists we could hardly assert more concerning them than that they had received a unique but strictly limited individual call bearing on their personal and spiritual relations with Himself, and their personal responsibilities toward their brethren. It is this side and aspect of their call with which alone St John concerns himself. In what a thoroughly personal and unofficial light for example he presents to us even the charge laid upon St Peter by the Lake of Galilee!

With regard then to the solemn charge of our risen Lord recorded by St John, while we might search the other Gospels to see whether there might not be some official charge corresponding to it, we are strongly confirmed in our previous conclusion that here also St John's record in itself cannot be taken as the basis and authority of any external function whatever even of the Church as a whole.

Was there then a unique and mighty power entrusted to those actual persons who heard from our Lord's own lips the gracious words? Could they thenceforth at their own discretion, or at least by their own act, forgive a man his sins against God? That would indeed seem to be a literal interpretation of the words, and if tenable for a moment would necessarily triumph over all adverse considerations drawn from its want of harmony with the general tenor of St John's Gospel. But whether or no it be literal, it is certainly meaningless, if at least we are to retain in the word *forgive* the very heart of its meaning, for this is the continuance or renewal of the love and affection of the sinned against for the sinner, so that God Himself cannot forgive sins by deputy.

He could by deputy send the message of forgiveness; He could give a deputy authority to remit penalties either under conditions or at his own discretion; He could even, apart that is from the love and justice of His nature, refuse or consent to forgive according as the sinner had or had not obtained a deputy's approval, but the forgiving in its essence can be done by Himself alone; and to say that any man could in the full and literal sense forgive a man his sins against God is not so much blasphemously to presume upon the Divine prerogative as to use words that are hopelessly without meaning of any sort.

Hence, assuming without discussion that no one will seek in other directions for any extraordinary power bestowed by our Lord's saying upon those disciples alone who heard Him speak, we must seek for His meaning in a wider application. Before doing so however we may notice that if the idea of the power of forgiving sins against God, in the direct and literal sense of the words, be an absurdity when that power is regarded as bestowed upon a chosen few of the human race, it is if possible still more absurd to contemplate the exercise of that power as part of the permanent official functions whether of the ministry alone or of the Church as a whole. But indeed the presumption against the supposition that there is here the charter of any official commission whatever is already so strong that we may now finally dismiss it.

We are now arrived at this point that we must either give up the full literal sense of the word forgive, or else understand that the sins to be forgiven are regarded in the first instance, not in their relation to God, but as being against the believer who is granting forgiveness.

Let us consider the first horn of the dilemma. Our Lord often spoke in parables, often in taking His words figuratively we arrive at a far deeper and a far more glorious truth but then, while things material may be taken as types and pictures of things spiritual, it is not so with such a word as forgiveness, it denotes a spiritual reality itself, and cannot be taken as the figure of some other. No interpretation has in fact openly professed to solve this passage by a figurative rendering, but it is well to see the reason of this clearly, for imperfect mutilated meanings have been employed and we must be on our guard against admitting them under some vague impression

that they are no more than figurative; and to suppose that in this passage that breathes the nearness of God, He should exclude from the idea of forgiveness its essential characteristic, and so limit to as bare a sense as mere etymology could suggest, the meaning of the word used to express it, would be to take neither a figurative nor the literal sense, but simply to evade the burden of interpretation altogether; better at once to confess that the passage is too hard for us and its meaning sealed. We pass by then as wholly inadequate all such interpretations as rob "*forgive*" of the fulness of its meaning, all such as take it to refer merely to the authoritative proclaiming of God's forgiveness, or to the performing of such other offices with regard to forgiveness as a deputy might perform. To such things our text may be related, but its full and direct import is elsewhere.

Moreover such deputy work would be necessarily official, and we have already seen independently that the presence of such a characteristic in the principal immediate interpretation is not compatible with the facts of the case.

There is now only one avenue of possible interpretation left open, and that is through regarding the sins contemplated as in the first instance committed against the believer who forgives.

In this view only can we attribute to "*forgive*" its full spiritual meaning, and understand the full value of the solemn antecedent injunction "*Receive ye the Holy Spirit*". In this view only can we also understand how the words are fully applicable to the whole Christian brotherhood and to each several member of the same, as the circumstances of their utterance show them to be.

In this way only do we find the incident to be thoroughly of a piece with the whole Gospel according to St John. Aye, and with his Epistle where faith is seen in her ideal perfect work, and all is essential and spiritual.

He who believes is born of God; he who is born of God does no sin. Such teaching is natural in the mouth of the man who alone records for us the solemn charge of human yet perfect and divine forgiveness.

All important are the antecedent words "*He breathed on them and said 'Receive ye the Holy Ghost'*". Not "*ye have*

now received”, but “receive ye”. The gift is sent to us, and we are earnestly bidden to welcome it, that God’s love and power may have free course among us, but we may refuse it.

In this case, however, the words that follow do not apply to us. Our power to forgive, with the glorious fulness of result held up before us by our Lord, is conditioned by our acceptance of God’s Spirit, and the consequent conformity of our own therewith. Yet imperfection is not death in this case any more than in St John’s descriptions of the new birth, only it is perfection that is exhibited to us.

If then we have welcomed God’s Spirit, a Spirit of discernment and love, and so forgive our enemy his sins against us, we shall be acting not in place of God, but on a spiritual identity with Him, and whosoever sins *we* forgive, they are then necessarily forgiven by God Himself, against Whom also they were sinned, and in the way of Whose forgiveness was standing as perhaps the strongest obstacle our own delay in forgiving, a delay that, so far as it was due to any fault on ourselves, would keep us in Gehenna, and so would double the evil in God’s sight of the original offence that called for our forgiveness, for we also are His children.

But here we come to the concluding part of the charge, namely “whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained”.

These words then, taken with the antecedent condition implied by the offer and sending of the Holy Ghost, teach us that if a wronged man, fully conformed to Christ by the indwelling Spirit, is any way hindered from forgiving the doer of the wrong, then God also is hindered in like manner. God will stand by His own child, and will not suffer him to be trodden underfoot by any one pressing forward to the throne of mercy.

There lies in this a very solemn warning, for we know that the only conceivable obstacle that could prevent the forgiving spirit of the spiritual man from going out in fulness of accomplishment towards the wrongdoer would be the hard impenitence of the latter, and this would be indeed an insuperable obstacle; hence he who sins against his brother must first desire his brothers forgiveness ere he ask for God’s.

By Christ’s words then man is put on a level with God, adopted, nay regenerate, into a living sonship of eternal strength.

This is the glorious truth which St John, true to his own special spiritual perceptions, is careful to relate; but just as the discourse to Nicodemus does not undo the institution of Baptism, or the teaching concerning the Bread from Heaven undo the institution of the Holy Eucharist, or any spiritual charge to the disciples in general nullify the special sending of the Twelve, so the passage before us does not destroy the fact that Jesus did give His apostles the special mission of carrying the gospel of forgiveness to the whole world, and that even today those who listen to that message from the lips of those who have inherited the commission of declaring it may receive thereby comfort and peace and renewed ability to receive it in power through faith.

Rather does our passage illuminate this apostolic message and teach us to see depths of teaching in it of which otherwise we should never have dreamed. But the two are not to be confounded, and our present endeavour has been to arrive at the full and immediate import of our Lord's message recorded for us by St John. This import has opened for us a marvellous glimpse into the Glory of God and His love for and nearness to ourselves. Let us accordingly earnestly desire a full portion of the offered spirit, that God's forgiveness and ours may go hand in hand in mutual support, and that when we are the offenders in our turn our penitence may be full, so that finally all malice and enmity may be clean done away in a perfect reign of love.

J. T. F. FARQUHAR.

P. S. I have rigidly confined myself to the direct exegesis of the charge in itself, but very strong corroboration of many points contended for will be found by those who will consider the history of penitential confession in the Catholic Church, starting with that exhortation of St James' "Confess ye your sins one to another".

J. T. F. F.
