

## FORGIVENESS: REALISING THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL

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**W**hat is the difference between forgiving and forgetting? You cannot decide to forget. It simply happens. The philosopher Immanuel Kant famously decided one day to “completely forget” the name of his former servant Martin Lampe, whom he had fired. We do not know how successful Kant was with his decision; but forgetting is, at least for people other than Kant, something involuntary. And forgiving? Is forgiving something voluntary? Can you decide to forgive - and thus it happens? Compared to forgetting, our understanding and will are more involved in forgiving. Forgiving has much to do with insight; but it is nothing you simply decide to do, either. Forgiving is a process; and being able to forgive is a gift.

Here, we will study forgiveness in the light of two key texts from the Bible, viz., Psalm 51(50), and the Lord’s prayer. Psalm 51 is something like the encyclopaedia of forgiveness. It seems to accompany its reader through a whole therapy of reconciliation. According to its first word, it is called the *Miserere* in Latin; but if we look it up in the Bible, the psalm’s beginning is different, and, it seems, more technical.

## Rereading mercy: The *Miserere*

1 For the leader. A psalm of David.

Just a headline? Secondary categorisations? Already these introductory words contain several vital hints for the process of forgiving.

The first remark, which means something like “For the director,” makes clear: the psalm is to be performed by a choir. So, it is public, it is communitarian, it requires preparation: the psalm is, in other words, a celebration. Forgiveness is, thus, set into the context of a sacred act. In the course of the psalm, this aspect of celebration will regularly return.

Then it is called “psalm.” It is a prayer. When people start to pray, everything changes. Prayer is a departure. Pope Francis speaks about the ever new “departure” (*uscita*) to which the Church is called. She is *ec-clesia*, a congregation of those “called out.” Prayer is at one level renouncing activism, entrusting ourselves to the one whom we thereby acknowledge as the Lord of history; but God wants to be history’s Lord through our participation. The person who prays becomes, thus, part of God’s history: his co-operator.<sup>1</sup>

The psalm transmits a crucial attitude for forgiveness. We can call it “identification.” The headline identifies King David as the person behind the text. Is it not disappointing that the words are set into one particular life rather than left open for my personal appropriation? No, the story and the person behind the words help every “I” to enter. Thus, we are challenged to open up the circles of our reflection and bring our own life, including our pain or obstruction, into contact with another story; and what story is that?

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<sup>1</sup> cf. 1 Corinthians 3:9.

2 When Nathan the prophet came to him after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

Through this second headline, the psalm makes us enter into the darkest moments of David's life. The Hebrew formulation is discrete, it gives only vague hints, twice using the verb "go to." David had been peering at the wife of Uriah, his officer. Bathsheba was taking a bath. The king wants her. He, consequently, takes possession of her by royal authority. Once an abuse drama is begun, it grows rampant. When Bathsheba reports that she is pregnant, David needs a cover-up. He calls Uriah from the battle and suggests him to "go to" his wife; which Uriah refutes, given that his men are out in the field: a man of honour and solidarity in front of a king getting more and more entangled in his self-obsession. David puts him in the front lines of the battle, so that he would be shot dead; and really, the message arrives soon: Uriah was killed by the enemy - or rather, by his own king's perversions.

David had "gone to" Bathsheba; and Nathan had "gone to" David, says the heading. The prophet tells David about a poor man with one single lamb; more than livestock: a pet, a family member. A rich man wants to show his generosity to a visitor and takes, instead of sacrificing one of his own flock, the poor family's only lamb to be slaughtered and served. The story is shocking; and quite expectably, David bursts out: "By God, the man who has done this deserves death" (1 Samuel 12:5). He thinks he can, as king, be judge again; but the criminal he is convicting is in fact himself.

The psalm thus explains the technique of identification by another story of identification: we can identify, by using David's prayer, with him, who himself was only able to see his guilt when identifying with the poor man whose lamb

was killed. Nathan let King David see his own perversion in all clarity by leading him to identify with someone else; and while David seemed to be identifying with a poor victim, he has to discover that he was identified a criminal. Often, we can only see how much pain we cause and how much we are caught up in our own business when confronted - and empathising - with another person. If we are enabled to pray with David's words we might also see where our own abuses of power need uncovering and healing, where my own perversion cries for conversion.

For the path of reconciliation, another factor is often significant: anger. Angrily, David bursts out, "By God, the man who has done this ..." Only in fury does he seem to be able to break through his mechanisms of self-protection. Outrage can make us see or say what needed to come out before healing comes. Anger in words may be hard to bear. As long as it does not turn into physical violence, it can however be liberating.

We are now turning to the psalm's own words, and we will keep calling its author "David."

- 3 Have mercy on me, God, in accord with your merciful love;  
in your abundant compassion blot out my transgressions.
- 4 Thoroughly wash away my guilt; and from my sin cleanse me.

The movement of "identification" continues in three other directions now.

Firstly, the psalm itself begins with a linguistic offer. It proposes us ways how to verbalise three key elements of

forgiving: mercy, guilt and purification. For each of the three elements, the text provides three different formulations. For “mercy,” David identifies as helpful expressions the superior’s generosity towards the minor, the unselfish solidarity among family members, and, finally, the acts - a plural - of empathetic, motherly care (*ḥen*, *ḥæsæd*, and *rahămîm*). For “guilt,” we get: the breaking - again, in plural - of order, the damage done to others, and the missing of a task (*pěšā ‘îm*, *‘ăwôn*, and *ḥattā*’).

The verbs for liberation are all three taken from purification contexts and arranged in growing intensity (*m-ḥ-h*, *k-b-s*, and *ṭ-h-r*). The first refers especially to the cleansing of dishes, the second, of vestments, and the third speaks of the purification of metals, which, of course, implies melting. The complete reconstruction which David desires will be a theme later on in the text (51:10).

A second way of “identification,” beyond that of offering words to identify attitudes and dynamics, is David’s capacity to own up to what he has done. Although the psalm’s vocabulary is community oriented, because it sees guilt also as breaking of social order and as damage made to others, David does something outstanding here: he says “I.” He is able to pin down the origin of the disturbances to himself. Even for humanity’s history of self-consciousness, these words mark a turning point.

The third “identification” is the most important. Before even speaking of himself and his sin, David is able to look at God, to remember his salvific acts, to identify his Judge as his Saviour: the confession of guilt begins with the confession of God’s mercy.

- 5 For I know my transgressions;  
my sin is always before me.

We hear how David is acknowledging his guilt; and indeed, he is not only conscious of his past acts but of their present effect: from the moment of insight to the moment of forgiveness, his sin is “before” him: he sees it, and it seems to block his access to real communion.

6 Against you, you alone have I sinned;  
I have done what is evil in your eyes  
So that you are just in your word,  
and without reproach in your judgment.

This is not to say that the others - Bathsheba, Uriah, David's people, who trust in their king's justice, are suddenly forgotten; but now David is in prayer, and he wants to exclude all calculation of publicity. This is an intimate moment, in which he hopes to receive, from the source of all life and justice, new strength, new purity. Only thus he can become an example of good governance again.

7 Behold, I was born in guilt,  
in sin my mother conceived me.

With this, David is not exculpating himself by blaming his sin to some inherited problem. He, rather, points out that from the first moment of his existence he was dependent on God's mercy.

8 Behold, you desire true sincerity;  
and secretly you teach me wisdom.

He mentions two gifts he hopes to receive (*'ämǣt* and *ḥākma*): the first, “faithfulness,” is the joyful correspondence

with the God of covenant and promise; the second means “wisdom,” that is, a lively understanding of God’s order in nature and history.

**9** Cleanse me with hyssop, that I may be pure;  
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

Cleansing with hyssop is needed when a leper or dead body has been touched (cf. Leviticus 14, Numbers 19). So what David says about his own situation is graphic. The purity he thus hopes to gain is, at the same time, the capacity to celebrate: while the colour of mourning is black, and crime is red, one celebrates in white.

**10** You will let me hear gladness and joy;  
the bones you have crushed will rejoice.

Just as in prophetic promise crushed bones are being reassembled into the new Israel, ready to return from exile (Ezekiel 37), so David wishes to be deconstructed and reconstructed by God. The king truly wants to begin a new life, to risk a new beginning.

**11** Turn away your face from my sins;  
blot out all my iniquities.

By wishing that God may not look, David says how much he is ashamed. By asking for total purification, he is, however, not saying that once God has forgiven, no more compensation is required. In David’s story, he will still have to fast, and, more than that, he will have to suffer the death of the child that is now on the way.

**12** A clean heart create for me, O God;  
renew within me a steadfast spirit.

What was prophetically promised for the whole people (Ezekiel 11:19; 36:26), David asks now individually: no more heart of stone. A new creative act of God is needed for a pure heart - the organ which takes parts in God's way of thinking; and a steadfast spirit - the organ which takes part in God's vitality.

**13** Do not drive me from before your face,  
nor take from me your holy spirit.

**14** Restore to me the gladness of your salvation;  
uphold me with a willing spirit.

God shares with us his way of creatively acting, his spirit. If we open ourselves to it, if we become "willing," we also become "noble, generous" - the same word, in Hebrew (*nəḏîb*).

**15** I will teach the wicked your ways,  
that sinners may return to you.

**16** Rescue me from violent bloodshed, God, my saving God,  
and my tongue will sing joyfully of your justice.

**17** Lord, you will open my lips;  
and my mouth will proclaim your praise.

**18** For you do not desire sacrifice or I would give it;  
a burnt offering you would not accept.

**19** My sacrifice, O God, is a contrite spirit;  
a contrite, humbled heart, O God, you will not scorn.

The psalm has accompanied us all the way to a new life orientation; we can call it “doxological.” It has two sides. For one, doxology is the praising of God that becomes testimony in front of others. The sinner has become a teacher and guide. The proclamation of God’s praise is contagious. Witnessing helps others to follow along the movement from perversion to conversion; that is, coming back to their merciful source of new life. Doxology is also a sacrificial act, because it is the giving up of our own contribution into the glory of God: human words - like physical gifts - are thus transformed in the sacrificial process. In spite of their weakness they can now be used to express God’s glory. All real sacrifice is, however, based on something else - not on words, not on animal gifts. The fundamental renunciation, the real coming close to God, the basic transformation - so, the key to all sacrifice - happens inside: when I feel my heart break.

**20** Treat Zion kindly according to your good will;  
build up the walls of Jerusalem.

**21** Then you will desire the sacrifices of the just,  
burnt offering and whole offerings;  
then they will offer up young bulls on your altar.

Our psalm does, however, not finish with the internalised religiosity of the contrite heart. At the end, the king - or, historically, someone who has seen the First Temple’s destruction - turns his view away from his own heart again: to human society, to the place where we can live together in peace. Jerusalem is the city of the promise that humanity can be restored to peace. In the reconstructed holy city, human

beings will revere God again in the order of liturgy, and will respect each other in the order of justice.

This is the course of forgiveness led by the psalm; but why scrutinise my own sin when I want to learn how to forgive? What have the wounds I received from others to do with God's forgiving me?

### **Trusting disciples: The Lord's Prayer**

forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors (Matthew 6:12)

Jesus teaches us to pray. He uses traditional words; but in his mouth they acquire new meaning. Surprisingly, for our painful disruptions of relations he uses financial vocabulary: "debts." Not that he wants us to start counting. Quite to the contrary, Jesus makes jokes about counting when it comes to forgiveness (cf. Matthew 18:22). Speaking of "debts," he rather sends us to other moments of his proclamation. The parable of the unforgiving servant comes to mind (Matthew 18:21–35): seeing how much God has given and forgiven me, I can forgive others.

A question however, remains. The servant was cast into torture because of his unwillingness to forgive. He had already been forgiven everything. It was his greed that caused the previously generous Lord to decide, now, against the servant. Is, then, my capacity to forgive the condition for God's forgiveness? It is "condition," not in the sense that the Father measures his mercy according to mine; but God's generosity creates a new living context for me, a new condition. In that sense, my forgiveness is God's condition. The point is not that I enter into panic because of my imperfect forgiveness but that I allow myself to be taken by God's spirit of mercy. Thus, the words that Jesus gives us as

our basic prayer remind us of Zacchaeus, the Jericho tax collector (Luke 19:1–10). He is surprised by Jesus’s spontaneous self-invitation. Everything that follows is equally spontaneous: Zacchaeus’ hospitality, his joy, his conversion. His generosity is not the outcome of complicated pondering; it is an automatic reaction. He begins a new life out of the joy to be accepted as son of Abraham in spite of his previous conduct.

The setting in which Matthew transmits us the text of the Lord’s prayer is significant. Jesus sees the crowd, and has now, on a mountain, gathered his disciples around him (Matthew 5:1). He seems to be addressing both, the many and the few. For the large public, the meaning of his words may be different from what they mean to his chosen representatives. With them, he has been living in community for the last months. When suggesting as prayer for his disciples: “as we forgive,” Jesus could refer to what he has seen. He seems to say: I have actually observed amongst you acts of generosity, understanding and reconciliation. At times, you live already in the Kingdom of God; and it is growing in you and by your collaboration.

Jesus proposes the risky prayer words, “Forgive us, as we forgive” right after “Give us today our daily bread.” What does that mean for the dynamic of forgiveness?

Jesus is teaching his followers a prayer which they can use again every new day: “give us today.” We need forgiveness ever anew. My entanglement in selfish grasping is not something I leave behind after a conversion experience, in a retreat, decision or therapy, once and for all. The problem will accompany us every single day. So every day, we will have to open ourselves anew towards the Father, who gives us the tender joy of forgiveness, the humbling experience of

being empowered to be his peacemakers, his reconcilers. So every day, we will need prayer.

In Lebanon, in 2003, a Muslim asked me: “Do you know what the most typically Christian prayer is?” He, of course, had an idea about the answer prepared: “The most typical is, ‘Give us today our daily bread.’ Christians ask only for today! They trust that God will give them again tomorrow.” This trust is, really, typically “apostolic.” The disciples are sent out, they are wandering from place to place; they cannot carry around heavy baggage: neither food - nor resentment. It is this trusting atmosphere out of which Jesus sends them into ever new situations; and every encounter is, in Jesus’s way of seeing things, an occasion for the works of God to be displayed (cf. John 9:3). The faith ‘baggage’ with which Jesus can in fact send out his disciples is the lively trust that this new day will bring new grace.

### **Living Gospel: The path of forgiveness**

What would a Christian theology of forgiveness look like? It all starts with joy. The Easter experience of Christ risen from the grave sets every Christian’s life into new light. The news and the newness of Easter make us “hope,” which is more than a sense of the probability that things may turn out well. The hope given to us at Easter is the anticipated joy of “living with Christ” (cf. Romans 6:8). The Resurrection takes possession of the disciples. They are grasped by its spirit. Their lives have received a new energy, colour, “vestment” (cf. Galatians 3:27). In it, the soul’s wounds and pains appear differently. Disappointment is no longer pervasive. Fundamentally now, life is felt as communion with the Risen. Therefore, Christ’s disciples are able to relativise guilt: bring it into the relation with God

rather than letting themselves be blocked by others - or by themselves.

The gift of joy liberates us to a surprising creativity. Rather than simply reacting, calculating, locking us up in the trap of self-victimisation, we feel called out and enabled by Christ to do the free, unexpected thing that creates a new situation: turning the other cheek or walking the other mile are such creative acts that can even create new relations (cf. Matthew 5:39). And if the other does not understand, accept or admit his guilt, or is unable to ask me for forgiveness? Even then, even if the relation cannot be re-established mutually, I am now enabled to enter the process of forgiveness: to live in a reconciled way with what has happened. Why? Because we can already sense that everything that happens is in fact part of God's history of salvation. This is more than saying: everything has its good side. Rather, everything will play its role in the finally good course of events. That is not to say that everything is good. It was wrong that Joseph's brothers sold him, out of jealousy, into slavery - but it became salvific, even for themselves: "It was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you," Joseph can say at the end of the story (Genesis 45:5). It was sinful that Judas betrayed, that the Sanhedrin delivered, and that Pilate convicted Jesus; but at Easter it became visible as the turning point towards the life of humanity.

The path of forgiving can be very long. We have sketched it out as leading from identification to communion; and on to exultation. Seeing my own weakness is a good opening for any healing. Experiencing Christ's resurrection is the apostolic source of courage and creativity. Exultation, finally, reminds us of the Easter Vigil's *Exsultet*, in which the Church expresses its astonishment at God's way of acting. There is

some irony, but also a lot of wisdom, in the paschal night's hymn, when it proclaims guilt to be "happy": the *felix culpa* which "earned" the Redeemer, that is, which created our need for Jesus to come. We are in the midst of the history of salvation, in which even sin and evil are assumed by God so that they can lead to good, indeed to a surprisingly better end. Our own forgiveness may trust in that outcome.