

♪ *The Lord is my light, my light and salvation. In God I trust, in God I trust.* ♪

That chant from Taizé is another way to sing the response to the Psalm we prayed today. It is an act of faith in the truth of the words of the 1st reading and the Gospel, "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light. On those dwelling in a land overshadowed by death, light has arisen." And the Lord is the light of the world.

It is that faith that makes it possible to practice what Jesus preaches in the Gospel, "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,*" or "*Reform your lives, for the Kingdom of God is at hand.*" I hear those words this way: Re-form your lives, that is, give your life a new form.

And to reform your life or to repent is more than being able to "Practice what you preach." When I hear that phrase, I think of the song Larry Hooper used to sing on the old Lawrence Welk show. "Practice, practice what you preach, I'm here to tell you that it's what you do not what you say that really counts on judgment day..." But I don't think that goes far enough. I no longer try to practice what I preach - I ask for the grace to practice what Jesus preaches.

The community Paul is writing to in the 2nd reading certainly needed learn how to practice what Jesus preached. They needed to repent. There were divisions and a kind of spiritual amnesia that forgets about the unity Jesus came to reveal, and prayed for at the Last Supper; the unity we pray for with him during this past week of prayer for Christian Unity. In our own day, factions & divisions are no small thing. They can even lead to violence and murder.

We are called today by Jesus to look at our lives, and to trust that he can give us what we need to re-form any part of our lives that is not guided by His Spirit of love and truth.

We begin to enter that process when we turn to Jesus for healing and forgiveness. What is it that we say just before coming to communion? "*Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.*" Do you believe that Jesus answers that prayer?

The first step in re-forming our lives is to believe *all* of what we say before coming to receive Communion. Lord, I am *not* worthy That is true for all of us, myself included. I do not come to receive the Lord in Communion because I am worthy, it is his grace that makes me worthy.

What if Peter & Andrew, and James & John had said, "We're not worthy to be your disciples?" I think Jesus would say to them, "I *know* you're not, that's why I am inviting you to follow me & be healed." And they chose to trust God and to follow Jesus. They trusted so completely that they left their business and their families.

Sometimes we look around us and judge *others* as not being worthy. That's what the people in Corinth were doing. When we do that we are not really looking at ourselves honestly and we are not believing in the power and love of God to guide us, to forgive us and to make us whole.

When I was in campus ministry at St. Bonaventure University, one of the seniors came to me early in the year and said, "*Fr. Peter, I can't continue to be a lector at Mass. There are too many hypocrites who come to Mass and I can't continue to go any more.*" My answer to him was, "*That's fine with me, there are a lot of hypocrites - but one more won't make that much difference then, will it?*" I went on to explain that none of us *perfectly* follows the way of Christ, none of us is without any sin, none of us always practices what Jesus preaches, so, in a way, we are all hypocrites - and Jesus invites us to receive him anyway.

In the second semester of that year, this same student decided to come back to church and wrote an article in the school newspaper quoting what I had said to him and saying that he realized that he was as much a sinner as the rest of his fellow students, and needed to come back to experience the mercy and love of Jesus.

That brings me to the second part of that prayer, "*only say the word and my soul shall be healed.*" Only say the word and I shall be healed. That is an act of faith that Jesus wants to heal and forgive *all* of me. Do we really believe that Jesus answers that prayer?

The Church teaches that one of the ways sins are forgiven is *through* receiving communion after admitting my need for mercy. We will say we believe in the forgiveness of sins when we profess our faith during the creed of the Mass. Can we practice what Jesus teaches through the Church?

That is far from easy. To re-form our lives is to learn to forgive myself and others. That is a difficult message to hear and to preach in our times, but it is a constant theme in the life and words of Jesus and the Church.

And it is a process: Gospel Forgiveness begins when I forgive myself for being so powerless & unworthy. It continues when I let go of the anger & resentment that is my first reaction to being hurt or excluded and so begin to allow my wounds to begin to heal.

I love what Nelson Mandella once said: *to hold on to anger, resentment or hatred is "like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies"*

To experience things like abuse or homelessness or rejection can break you in pieces. But to let go of those wounds can open the door for the Spirit to put you back together. Still, it is important to remember that to forgive does NOT mean to excuse. We have been hearing a lot about the danger of terrorism at the Olympics, and there seems to be another shooting at a school or business every other day. The evil deeds done by others, whether in the name of anger or retaliation or security, are inexcusable, and need to be stopped and punished. There is a clear need to do what we can to prevent deadly violence around the world & in our own country.

Still, only forgiveness makes reconciliation possible, when God removes the blindfold of anger and hurt so that I can see injustice wherever it occurs and see what I can do to change it. Forgiveness makes peace possible, in my heart, in families, among religions and in a world still bleeding from terror and war & random shootings.

If all that seems impossible - that's because it is - without God. To forgive is God's gift. As one poet put it, "to err is human, to forgive divine" (Alexander Pope). It's only possible through the power of the one who died on a cross, asking his father to forgive his murderers; through the one who rose from the dead, giving life to those who follow him; through the one who is present here through his words, through each other and through the Eucharist we receive and share.

If you asked me how you can forgive someone who has hurt you, or even how you can forgive yourselves, the first thing I would say to you is, "You can't-without God's help." Then I would ask you if you believe that Jesus can forgive. [do you?]

This is how I pray when I come up against a difficult challenge to forgive: "Jesus, I can't forgive, I believe you can, I think I'll let you forgive." The short version: "I can't, you can, I think I'll let you." I was challenged to practice what Jesus preaches about forgiveness during a parish mission some years ago.

I was at a morning mission Mass and the Friar who was giving the mission with me was preaching. The theme that day was the mercy of God. As he was doing the homily, a woman walked into the church talking loudly. She was rude, she was obnoxious and she was disruptive. I got very angry inside. She quieted down, but I was still seething.

Then we came to the greeting of peace, shortly after the words of the Our Father, "*forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" I knew that the reason the greeting of peace comes at this time of the Mass is because of those words, and I could hear the Lord speaking in my heart, "*You have to go to her, Peter, and wish her peace.*" But I was still mad, so I fought with the Lord, "*No way, José, I can't say 'Peace be with you' and mean it. I want to boot her out of the church!*"

I have found that if you fight with God long enough, God wins, so I prayed to know what to do - and remembered what St. Francis used to say before he preached in the city. Finally, I went to the disruptive woman, looked her in the eye and used the words Francis often spoke, "*The Lord give you peace.*" I was still unable to say, "Peace be with you" and mean it, but I knew that Jesus could bless her with peace even before I was ready.

Within a few minutes, I too felt the peace of Christ in my heart.

May the Lord give each of you peace!

May his grace empower you to let him forgive those who have hurt you.

May his mercy give you the power to receive his forgiving, healing peace.

First Reading - Isaiah 8:23-9:3 [The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light]

Responsorial Psalm - Psalm 27 "The Lord is my light and my salvation."

Second Reading - 1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17 [Let there be no divisions among you]

Gospel - Matthew 4:12-23 [Re-form your lives for the kingdom of God is at hand]