

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 25) – Year B – October 28, 2009 - Homily
Job 42:1-6, 10-17; Psalm 34:1-8, 19-22; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 10:46-52
Susan E. Wilmot

In 1944, the Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko's mother took him from Siberia to Moscow. They were among those who witnessed a procession of twenty-thousand German war prisoners marching through the streets of Moscow. This is how he describes the scene in his autobiography: "The pavements swarmed with onlookers, cordoned off by soldiers and police. The crowd was mostly women -- Russian women with hands roughened by hard work, lips untouched by lipstick, and with thin hunched shoulders, which had borne half of the burden of the war. Every one of them must have had a father or a husband, a brother or a son killed by the Germans. They gazed with hatred in the direction from which the column was to appear. At last we saw it. The generals marched at the head, massive chins stuck out, lips folded disdainfully, their whole demeanor meant to show superiority over their plebian victors. ... The women were clenching their fists. The soldiers and policemen had all they could do to hold them back.

All at once something happened to them. They saw German soldiers, thin, unshaven, wearing dirty blood-stained bandages, hobbling on crutches or leaning on the shoulders of their comrades; the soldiers walked with their heads down. The street became dead silent -- the only sound was the shuffling of boots and the thumping of crutches. Then I saw an elderly women in broken-down boots push herself forward and touch a policeman's shoulder, saying, 'Let me through.' There must have been something about her that made him step aside. She went up to the column, took from inside her coat something wrapped in a colored handkerchief and unfolded it. It was a crust of black bread. She pushed it awkwardly into the pocket of a soldier, so exhausted that he was tottering on his feet. And now from every side women were running toward the soldiers, pushing into their hands bread, cigarettes, whatever they had. The soldiers were no longer enemies. They were people." (An excerpt from *A Precocious Autobiography*, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Collins, London).

You may be wondering why I would share this particular story and what it has to do with this evening's reading from the Book of Hebrews. You have probably already figured this out -- there are a couple of important themes for us to examine this evening. The first is sacrifice, and the second is forgiveness. The Book of Hebrews was written mostly for first century Jews and so it can seem remote and somewhat incomprehensible to us in our time and place. For example, this whole section of Hebrews, including chapters 5 through 10 is focused on a development in understanding of sacrifice and forgiveness. The transition described in tonight's reading, focuses on the difference between the long line of Israelite priests who offered daily sacrifices for their sins and the sins of the people, and Jesus' efficacious sacrifice, once for all. By virtue of their humanity, the offerings of the earthly priests provided only a temporary lifting of the burden of sin, which had to be repeated continuously and frequently. On the other hand, Jesus, as the Son of God, completed the work of atoning sacrifice for all time through His death on the cross. In the power of the resurrection, Jesus has taken His rightful and exalted position at the right hand of God the Father, and is our everlasting high priest. Jesus' offering of Himself is the only perfect offering for sin, and through his life, death and resurrection He has completed the work of redemption for the life of the whole world.

As followers of Christ, we believe that in Him, all that is necessary for our salvation is already in place, and so we have a new perspective on our own understanding of what it means to make sacrifices for Christ's sake and the sake of others. The Psalms speak of a sacrifice of

thanksgiving to God. The Gospels tell of sacrificial giving and sharing to bless others in Christ's name. All of us have stories of how we have sacrificed in our own lives for the greater good in friendships, marriage, other relationships, as parents for our children, or in our careers. Our men and women of the armed forces understand that in times of conflict they are called to sacrifice their lives to establish greater peace and security for all Americans, and even for those in other countries around the world. Unlike Jesus' gift, our sacrifices do not effect salvation, but they do offer a tangible expression of our love of God and our neighbors to a world that is still reeling from the consequences of humanity's sins.

In the old covenant system, daily sacrifice for sins is offered because the system is effectively closed with no possibility of transformation or release from sinfulness. In the new covenant of Christ's body and blood, by God's grace and our faith, believers are released from sin and death, and given new life in Christ. The power of sin is that it traps us in the past on a sort of treadmill of guilt, shame and resentment. It stunts our spiritual growth both individually, and as a community of faith. Alexander Schmemmann describes the triumph of sin and the main sign of its rule in the world, as division, opposition, separation, and hatred. He goes on to say, "the first break through this fortress of sin is forgiveness: the return to unity, solidarity, [and] love. To forgive is to put between me and my 'enemy' the radiant forgiveness of God Himself.... Forgiveness is truly a 'breakthrough' of the Kingdom [of God] into this sinful and fallen world." The power of forgiveness in Christ Jesus our Lord is that we no longer need to be held captive by past sins. When we come to Jesus with repentant hearts, we are forgiven and released from sin. In forgiveness, we are released from past pain and can learn how to forgive others and ourselves, as Christ has forgiven us. When we forgive others, we are releasing them to Christ's care. We are also removing any shackles of power that the other may have over us, often made real in painful or bitter memories.

Yevtushenko beautifully describes for us how the Russian survivors first see the German prisoners as hated enemies. An incredible transformation takes place, through the courage of one woman and then others. They start to find a way to see the exhausted, starved and wounded young men through God's radiant forgiveness for who they are: fellow human beings caught up in the terrible violence of war. It is a profound moment to ponder and raises many questions for us to bring before the Lord in prayer. Is there anyone in our own life that we see as an enemy? Do we pray for them? Have we imagined how we might share Christ's living presence and forgiveness with them or others in our lives who have wounded us, or those whom we have injured? Whatever the hurts inflicted on us, there is a way to healing, wholeness and freedom. In forgiveness, Jesus has shown us the way, and taught us to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Forgiveness is one of the most creative acts anyone can engage in. We do well to remember that all acts of creation flow from God's power, and release in us the gift of healing and new life. What a great comfort it is to know the promise that Christ Jesus is our savior for all eternity, and that our sins are forgiven. Our faith in Christ can indeed heal us. May we have the courage to share this incredible gift with all in our deeply wounded world.

Amen.