

# CHRIST IN TEN THOUSAND PLACES

## Homilies toward a New Millennium

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Not many years ago, in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, in a tiny town named Mafraq, two Bedouin youths got into a fight, fell to the ground in their fury. One lad pulled out a knife, plunged it fatally into the other's flesh. In fear he fled for days across the desert, fled the slain boy's vengeful relatives, fled to find a Bedouin sanctuary, a "tent of refuge" designed by law for those who kill unintentionally or in the heat of anger. At last he reached what might be a refuge—the black-tented encampment of a nomad tribe. He flung himself at the feet of its leader, an aged sheik, begged him, "I have killed in the heat of anger; I implore your protection; I seek the refuge of your tent."

"If God wills," the old man responded, "I grant it to you, as long as you remain with us."

A few days later the avenging relatives tracked the fugitive to the refuge. They asked the sheik, "Have you seen this man? Is he here? For we will have him."

"He is here, but you will not have him."

"He has killed, and we the blood relatives of the slain will stone him by law."

"You will not."

"We demand him!"

"No. The boy has my protection. I have given my word, my promise of refuge."

"But you do not understand. He has killed your grandson!"

The ancient sheik was silent. No one dared to speak. Then, in visible pain, with tears searing his face, the old man stood up and spoke ever so slowly: "My only grandson—he is dead?"

"Yes, your only grandson is dead."

"Then," said the sheik, "then this boy will be my son. He is forgiven, and he will live with us as my own. Go now; it is finished."<sup>1</sup>

A powerful story, good friends. A story with a biblical background. A background in today's two readings: in Daniel and in Luke. Sin in Daniel, forgiveness in Luke. Let's look at Daniel, then at Luke, finally at ourselves.

## I

First, sin in Daniel. A passionate prayer. It was not shaped by Daniel, but by an inspired scribe later on.<sup>2</sup> It is not the prayer of an individual; it is the prayer of a community. It does not ask for enlightenment, as the context would demand, enlightenment on why Jeremiah's prophecy of a restoration of Israel after 70 years has not been fulfilled; it is an admission of public guilt, and an impassioned petition for the restoration of God's privileged people.<sup>3</sup> With some changes in content and style, that prayer might well become our nation's prayer if this Lent is to become real. A suggestion from your homilist:

Ah, Lord, great and awesome God, you are unfailingly faithful to the covenant your Son cut with us in his blood, steadfast in love for all those who love you and keep your commandments. We have sinned; we have done wrong; we have acted wickedly; we have rebelled; we have turned aside from your commandments and ordinances. We have not listened to our own prophets, to John Paul II and Martin Luther King, to Dorothy Day and Mother Teresa, who spoke in your name to our political leaders and to all the people of our land. We have not listened as you spoke to us of the millions of your infant images forcibly kept from the light of day; spoke to us of our children, one of every four growing up poor, living in some kind of hell, in the richest nation on earth; spoke to us of our elderly rummaging in garbage cans for the food we discard so casually; spoke to us of the AIDS-afflicted crying to us for compassion while so many of us see their affliction as your vengeance on their sin; spoke to us of the African Americans still second-class citizens in "the land of the free"; spoke to us of our Jewish sisters and brothers fearful that the Holocaust has not yet burned itself out; spoke to us of our judges empowering physicians to take the life that is yours alone to give and take.

Righteousness is on your side, O Lord, but open shame falls on us, the inhabitants of the District of Columbia and all of

America, those who are near and those who are far away, because of the treachery they have committed against you. Open shame, O Lord, falls on us, our leaders, our elected officials, because we have sinned against you. To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against Him, and have not obeyed the voice of the Lord our God by following His laws, which He set before us by His servants our prophets.<sup>4</sup>

## II

Second, forgiveness in Luke. I find it at once awesome and comforting in Luke how the father of the prodigal sees his wayward son from afar, is “filled with compassion,” runs to meet him, and before the sinful son can say “I have sinned against heaven and before you,” throws his arms around him and kisses him (Lk 15:20–21). Pre-eminently, that father is God—the God of whom the Psalmist sings,

The Lord is merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love....  
He does not deal with us according to our sins,  
nor repay us according to our iniquities....  
As a father has compassion for his children,  
so the Lord has compassion for those who fear Him.  
For He knows how we were made;  
He remembers that we are dust.

(Ps 103:8–14)

What is awesome and comforting is that our God, our Father, always takes the initiative in forgiveness; for without God's grace no one can cry to God "I'm sorry." The younger son, who squandered his inheritance in dissolute living, who devoured his father's property with prostitutes, could never have decided to say to his father, "I have sinned against heaven and before you" (Lk 15:18), if God had not touched his heart with divine tenderness.

But there is another side to forgiveness. You heard it from Luke's Jesus: "Forgive, and you will be forgiven" (Lk 6:37). I find it at once fascinating and frightening in Luke how Jesus links God's forgiveness with our own. If my sins are to be forgiven, it's simply not sufficient to say with sincerity "I'm sorry." Remember the slave in Matthew whose king forgave him the equivalent of 150,000 years' wages (Mt 18:23 ff.)? Remember the slave's refusal to have mercy on a fellow slave who

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owed him the equivalent of a hundred days' wages? Remember the king's anger? The unforgiving slave would be tortured until he paid the whole of his impossible debt. Remember Jesus' harsh application? "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother [or sister] from your heart" (v. 35).