

# SoulSpace

SERIES: AGENDA FOR LENT

Season colour: **PURPLE**

In this series, **Gerard Moloney CSsR** explores the meaning of Lent and how to make the most of this holy season.

There's a certain harshness in today's society, a view that for some no forgiveness is possible.

We see it reflected in so much of the tabloid press, which uses words like 'evil', 'sick', 'depraved', 'disgraced' to describe anyone who has fallen from grace or has been found guilty of a crime. No distinction is made between the person and his or her crime. There is no possibility of forgiveness or redemption. The person is judged and condemned forever.

We can see that harshness also in many people's attitude towards prisoners. There is the common view that prison should be about punishment only, that those who for whatever reason end up behind bars should be shown no mercy, that they deserve what they get and more.

This attitude can exist in our own lives too. Someone hurts us deeply, or we feel betrayed by a person once close to us, or a loved one may have been abused by a person we trusted - and we feel an anger, bitterness, hatred that we cannot let go of. Reconciliation and forgiveness can be extremely difficult.

## NO LIMITS

Yet the challenge to forgive is at the heart of our faith. It is something Jesus preached about over and over again, something he practised in his own life and that he asks his followers to do, too.

Remember when Peter asked Jesus how many times a person should be forgiven. Would seven times be enough? According to Jewish tradition, God forgives three times and punishes on the fourth. Since human beings could not be more forgiving than God, forgiveness was, therefore, limited to three times.

Peter must have thought that to forgive someone seven times was being more than generous since it went way beyond what Jewish tradition taught. And certainly, to a reasonable person, seven times seems very generous indeed. But Jesus says it is not generous

enough at all. The Christian is challenged to forgive not seven times, but seventy times seven. In other words, the Christian must never stop forgiving. There can be no limit to our mercy and forgiveness.

And the reason is simple: it is because God has forgiven us first. No matter who we are or how sinful we think we are, God has forgiven us first. God's mercy is always greater than our wrongdoing or our sense of justice.

That is the extraordinary story of our salvation – that our God is a loving, forgiving God, who never stops loving and forgiving us. Time and again in the Old Testament we find God forgiving God's people, even when they didn't deserve it. The New Testament tells us that God's only Son was sent among us to save us, by dying on a cross, even though we don't deserve it. All done out of love. All free gift.

And that must be our motive for forgiving. We must forgive because God has forgiven us; we must be merciful because God has been merciful to us. It is as simple and as challenging as that.

The sacrament of reconciliation is our opportunity to obtain God's mercy and to let go of whatever keeps us from God. It acknowledges that while forgiveness is difficult and there is a lot of evil in our world, the power of forgiveness is greater still, and with God's help we too can forgive and be forgiven.

Confession is the sacrament of new beginnings. None of us is perfect, we all fall and fail and we constantly sin against God and against each other. In confession, the focus is not on our sins but on God's bountiful forgiveness, not on our failings but on God's mercy, not on raking over the past but on being restored, set free, made whole again.

That is the promise and the invitation the sacrament of reconciliation offers each one of us. It is a promise and an experience of God's bountiful love. It's an invitation we should respond to during this Season of Lent and as often as we can. ■



## Today's readings

**Jeremiah 31:31-34**

**Hebrews 5:7-9**

**John 12:20-30**

The hour of Jesus has arrived. He has reached the end of his public ministry, which reached its climax in the raising of Lazarus from the dead, the action which, ironically, leads to the plot to put Jesus to death.

The coming of the Greeks denotes the gathering of all people to Jesus when he is glorified, which will happen on the cross. Jesus' death is the ultimate

expression of his self-giving in fulfilling his mission from God. This attitude is what he expects of his disciples. We should understand the idea of loving or hating one's life in the sense of asking ourselves where our real values in life lie. Do we love the things of this world and would rather hold on to them at any cost, or are we prepared to let them go so that we can receive something infinitely more satisfying in this life and the next?

## GOD'S WORD TODAY



# FORGIVENESS SETS US FREE

The sacrament of reconciliation is our opportunity to obtain God's mercy and to let go of whatever keeps us from God.

Some years ago The Corrs released a song called 'Forgiven, Not Forgotten'. It did well in the charts but, popular though the song was, we know that it is not easy to either forgive or forget.