

Proper 19, Year A, 2023; 17 September 2023

Genesis 50.15-21; Psalm 103.1-13; Romans 14.1-12, Matthew 18.21-35

There is no doubt, despite all the ready available caricature, the Christian faith is a demanding one. We should have no doubt concerning this, as today's Gospel forcefully reminds us. In Matthew's Gospel we have already heard Jesus say, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...' (Mt. 5.44). 'Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. (Mt. 5.39-41) Jesus' way, the way that he marks for us to follow in, is counterintuitive. It needs to be learnt, relearnt, and learnt again.

Peter asks a question of Jesus? Why? Because he has been considering the demands Jesus' teaching makes. He is considering what Jesus' teaching regarding forgiveness means. He is considering what it could mean for him. Jesus has introduced Peter to a loving God, a compassionate God, a merciful God, a forgiving God not a God who is stingy or lacking in generosity, what we might call a mean heart. The question posed is about dimension. It is not a question about the need to exercise forgiveness – this Peter has grasped. It is a question concerning the magnitude of forgiveness. The act of forgiveness. 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times.'

This a scene we can well imagine for ourselves. For days, perhaps weeks Peter has been thinking about the magnitude of the act of forgiveness. He grasps that it is demanding. He knows something must shift. He therefore approaches Jesus with his question about forgiveness with the suggestion of seven times. Let's stop there for a moment. We grasp immediately that the number is already taking us out of our comfort zone and distancing us from human convention. By suggesting seven Peter is putting a number on the magnitude of the need to forgive so as to keep it within human grasp, to contain, to manage, to make it achievable.

Unfortunately for Peter, for us here and for all who desire to live a Christian life Jesus answers by blowing the whole question of magnitude out of the water by his answer taking us into the realms of multiplication. 'Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times.' The number that Jesus sets before Peter is 11 times greater than his single digit of seven. Try and forgive seven times and then you still have seventy more times to achieve what is required.

Jesus continues his teaching on forgiveness with 'The Parable of the Unforgiving Slave' about the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom, which has been a consistent theme in Matthew's gospel throughout. It is a parable about God's mercy and generosity, which

is absolute. It is a parable in which the slave and his family are set free from their debt. This is no way to run an economy. The ledger is out of sync? But that is the point. He, Jesus, does not count the cost. Rather he gives his life to pay the debt owed to God to set us free that we may daily embark on the path to a life freed from sin and the fear of death. The debt owed is one of the metaphors employed to describe salvation. This kingdom is a kingdom we are already being called to inhabit in the *ekklēsia*, the assembly, the church. See Matthew 16.18 "Upon this rock I will build my church." The rock here being the true confession of Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

The parable leaves those with ears to hear feeling uneasy with its talk about slaves in the Roman and Greek world and the community they have amongst each another. The parable is set up in such a way that we the listeners are to identify God with the person of the king and the slaves as ourselves. We who are enslaved to many possessions such as the love of money, feeling superior, etc. while nurturing unforgiving hearts.

Jesus is the sovereign Lord of forgiveness. He teaches about forgiveness in and through the Lord's prayer. Our Father... forgive our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us, forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. Our Father God reminds us that ours is a communal faith. When we pray 'our' we are placing ourselves within the *ekklēsia*, the assembly, the church, the body of Christ, a living organism.

As we have seen, the language employed is that of owing a debt. Once the debt is paid, once the sin is forgiven something resembling an equilibrium is possible, a state of peace becomes a possibility. However fragile it is. Where a debt is owed and there is no prospect of payment things are out of kilter meaning out of balance. Harmony is absent. People suffer. They inflict injury not only on themselves, but grievously on others.

We may wonder with our 21st century perspective why Jesus chose to use this parable with the Greek/Roman backdrop of the slave reality in the classical world. One reason has already been mentioned. Humanity, *homo sapiens*, is enslaved to what Paul calls the elemental spirits of the world (Colossians 2:8). Christ and Christ alone is to become our freedom and is our freedom. Another reality is that people who understand themselves primarily as belonging to a group, be they socially disadvantaged or socially privileged or just making the best of all the confusion, often are prone to think of themselves as special, a cut above the others, but once amongst themselves they too tend to divide against each other.

The main point of the parable is to point out that the man who has been shown mercy, because he pleaded, he prayed, is shown a mercy beyond his imagining as his debt is cancelled, and he is set free (that is how I read 'released him' v. 27). The man's reaction, this human behaviour is typical of many. They receive mercy, but they are

unable to extend that mercy. They haven't been turned inside out. Their world hasn't been turned upside down. They have not become the new Adam, but remain enslaved to the old Adam, to meanness of heart or human convention or common sense, should they have any.

But I must drill harder and deeper. I have been saying for a little while one can only grow in Christ, become mature in Christ, if one is ready to learn, relearn, and learn again, but first one must listen and listen carefully. There are I suspect a good number who think Peter's seven is already a bit much and Jesus' seventy-seven simply illusory, hyperbole. (I prefer another translation seventy times seven).

Forgiveness, true forgiveness is a divine act. It is dependent on divine grace which we are to align with. Give me Lord such strength that I may forgive from the heart. There will be those, calling themselves Christians, who see the splinter in their neighbour's eye, but don't see the log in their own eye and possibly never will.

It often manifests today in the righteous, strident and angry activists. If people think that forgiveness or reconciliation are optional and not an imperative of the Gospel I have no idea which Bible they have been exposed to, which church they have been attending, what they think faith is or what sort of image of Jesus they have conjured up in their heads.

Only a few weeks ago we joined the psalmist in his plea for a new heart. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." (Psalm 51:10) It is through Christ, in Christ, and with Christ that we become a new creation in him and a new heart is given. The heart 'does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful' (1 Cor. 13.5), but rather insists on doing good.

Much the same sentiment as outlined above is also to be found in the reading from Paul's letter to the Romans, when he urges us to honour the Lord. "Whatever we do, we must do it to honour the Lord." Loose talk does not honour the Lord. Picking fights does not honour the Lord. Telling half-truths does not honour the Lord. In heartfelt forgiving, we honour God, and in honouring God we have respect for ourselves. Give me Lord such strength that I may not be a grudge collector, but may learn to forgive and forgive again, from my heart. **Amen.**