

Third Sunday of Easter

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Revd Tim Barker at St Andrew's parish church Guernsey on Sunday 1 May 2022

Readings: Acts of the Apostles 9 vv 1-6 and John 21 vv 1-19

In Psalm 103, we find these words:

He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far he removes our transgressions from us.

These words are attributed to King David, who had every reason to be conscious of, and deeply thankful for, God's forgiveness.

This is not a one-off statement. Jesus reminds that forgiveness is central to the heart of God.

When Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive a person who has offended him, he probably thought he was being especially generous when he asked Jesus if he should forgive 'up to *seven* times'. Echoing the number of days of the week and the days of the creation story in Genesis, the number seven suggests completeness. But this is not enough. Jesus tells Peter, 'not seven times, but *seventy-seven* times'. Jesus makes it clear that we must forgive our offender an unlimited amount of times, because that's the way that God has forgiven us.

Jesus makes it clear in this conversation that our forgiveness for others should never run out, because that's the way in which God forgives - with unlimited amounts of grace, mercy, and forgiveness. And that means that God is the God of a second chance.

Is this just words?

No. The two readings which we have heard today leave us in no doubt that God puts this into practice. And the two people on whom we focus are perhaps the two people who were most instrumental in the early spread of the Christian faith.

"Saul heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.'"

St Paul had actively led the persecution of Christians. He had condoned the stoning of Stephen, the first martyr. And yet Jesus confronts Paul on the road to Damascus, and challenges him to change his ways. Soon, Paul is convinced of the truth of Jesus and becomes one of the earliest and greatest missionaries and promoters of the Christian faith. In his letters, he does not shy away from admitting that he had been wrong.

"Jesus said to Peter the third time, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.'"

St Peter, as Jesus knew he would, betrayed Jesus when he was at his most vulnerable, being tried and prepared for crucifixion. When he sees the empty tomb, Peter believes. But the

conversation which Jesus and Peter have in today's gospel reading is an essential part of his rehabilitation. Jesus does not shy away from facing the uncomfortable facts, and receives and accepts Peter's heartfelt apology.

In contrast to this, we cannot ignore the highly judgemental attitude of many who post in social media and comment in newspapers, where one often finds the view, in relation to somebody whom public opinion judges as not having been sufficiently punished, that 'they should lock them up and throw away the key'. Already there is consideration of what ought to happen to President Vladimir Putin, were he ever to appear before an international court to answer for his decision to invade Ukraine and allow unspeakable acts of violence against innocent civilians.

Undoubtedly, we must allow justice to take its proper course. The response to actions that offend against what is just and right may well include punishment, to demonstrate society's disapproval of certain actions.

But where does forgiveness fit into this? Is Jesus being unrealistic, both in his conversation with Peter about forgiveness without limit and in his forgiveness of Peter and Paul?

It may be easier to forgive when we are asked for forgiveness by someone who has offended or harmed us. This depends on the nature of the harm or offence, of course. But admission that harm has been done may perhaps be helpful.

It is significantly harder when the person who has done the damage does *not* acknowledge it. In those cases, the sense of grievance may be life-long and we may believe that the guilty party does not deserve forgiveness.

But as Christians we need to take Jesus seriously. We forgive because we have been forgiven. 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.'

And many have found freedom in forgiveness. It is a process. Perhaps Jesus acknowledges this when he tells Peter to forgive 'not seven times, but *seventy-seven* times'. We may need to make repeated choices to forgive so as to get to a place where we can accept that we have forgiven the person who has offended us. It is hard to forgive. We need time and patience. We need to grapple honestly with the offence so as to be able to move to forgiveness.

When there is no apology, no recognition of the harm done, our progression towards being able to offer forgiveness is not for the person who had done the harm but rather for our sakes, and so that we can lay aside the burden of anger or resentment that we carry. We do it to return to wholeness of mind and body and soul.

I think that those who told me, when a child, 'to forgive and forget' were mistaken. Forgive? Yes. Forget? Is that possible? Rather, at every stage of our progression towards forgiveness, we face up to and acknowledge the harm and the pain. And then make the choice to forgive. This is not avoiding the pain, which is dangerous, but allowing Jesus to help us work through the pain, conscious that God can take even the most painful and distressing situation and use it for his purposes, as he did with Peter and Paul, when we are prepared to choose faith over despair and freedom over bondage.