

Trinity 14 Sunday 13th September 2020
St Andrews Sung Eucharist 10.00am.

(Genesis chapter 50 v. 15-21.)
Romans chapter 14 vs 1-12
St. Matthew chapter 18 v. 21-35.

The Bible repeatedly informs us that we ought to forgive those who have injured us. And this theme is very strong in our readings set for this service. And we know that we should forgive those who have injured us for it is ingrained in our minds from the Lord's Prayer. But, and it is a very big But because all of us present I suspect have heard people say "I'll never be able to forgive" and they name a person or a group of people who have hurt them in the past. We may have felt like that ourselves and perhaps even now there are some people and some situations where we find it well nigh impossible to forgive those who have injured us.

So let's turn to the Gospel for today and reflect more deeply upon the words of Jesus and his conversation with St. Peter. There are two parts to this passage from St. Matthew chapter 18. The first is a brief exchange between Peter and Jesus about the nature of forgiveness and the second is the vivid parable of the king who forgives one servant an impossible amount and yet that servant is then unable to forgive a fellow servant a reasonable debt.

"Peter came and said to Jesus, Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?" By asking this question Peter is assuming that one does, after all, have to draw the line somewhere, as anyone concerned with discipline surely knows. Peter was sensitive enough to realise that something of Jesus' teaching led him to conclude that the traditional Jewish teaching of drawing a line after forgiving a person three times for committing the same sin, would not be sufficiently generous and so Peter offers seven times, a number symbolising fullness, that is, something complete. But Jesus responds with those now famous words "not seven times, but I tell you, seventy seven times."

This is Jesus' way of telling Peter that forgiveness is not a commodity to be counted on a calculator. Not only is forgiveness to be limitless but it also cannot be quantified. The language of numbers is inappropriate when one contemplates forgiveness. And Jesus goes on to illustrate this with the parable of the king and his servant. And if Peter listens carefully, he will find that this story shifts the terms of his question altogether, and places him in not a comfortable position, say on the outside, like that of a judge, but rather in a very awkward and vulnerable position on the inside.

There was a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants, and the use by Jesus of the word king in this context, automatically links this imagery with God himself. And sin here is seen as debt, just as Matthew also underlines in his reference to the Lord's prayer at chapter 6 "and forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors". The servant in question owes his master an enormous sum, more than we can conceive. The servant is desperate to be relieved of the debt and quite amazingly the king forgives the debt, fully and freely. There then follows the unbelievable response by this same servant in response to a fellow servant who owes him a very small sum.

And when we reflect upon this parable the truth begins to dawn on the difficulty of genuine forgiveness. Does the concluding verse at chapter 18 v. 35 actually mean that, if I do not forgive those who injure me, God will withhold forgiveness? Is divine forgiveness conditional on my letting go of grudges and hurts? This would seem to be the conclusion.

However, let's look at this parable again. The most obvious point is that human forgiveness is rooted in divine forgiveness. The king forgives his servant an incalculable amount of indebtedness. 10,000 talents represents more than the wages of a labourer for 150,000 years! There is simply no way to measure the extent of God's generosity when it comes to forgiveness. Seventy seven times does not say it,-- 10,000 talents is not able to quantify it either. But there is another very important point, forgiveness has to do with something very different to that of a call for justice. The first servant cannot get away from the concept of indebtedness and forgiveness as a power game. However, retribution was swift and sure. The King withdrew his leniency and sent the servant for punishment. And the parable closes, "so my heavenly father will also do to everyone of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." And this stark statement I suggest, leaves us speechless.

The Bible repeatedly makes it clear that there are consequences to our behaviour. However, God is benevolent and the essential point in this parable is that we are to act towards others as God has acted towards us. And we are called to forgive from the heart. Forgiving and being forgiven cannot by their very nature be separated.

Nonetheless, even when we can accept this intellectually, hurts are still not easy to deal with. As soon as we get hurt self-pity walks in by the front door. For, when we entertain self-pity a legacy of bitterness, resentment and anger is produced. The memory of wrongs flows inwards, where it festers. It poisons our spirit and destroys our capacity to love. Here is where forgiveness comes in. Though never easy, even from a human point of view, it makes great sense. We rid ourselves of the burden of bitterness and resentment. We must not give terrorism this power over us.

So what does this passage say to us in the light of such events as 9-11(now 19 years ago this week) or 7-7 (now 15 years ago) or the Manchester bombings (now 2 years ago)? What does it say to those who are hurt by the sin of others? To begin with it portrays in this dynamic story the incredible kindness of God. A God who surprises people, by dealing with them not on a scale of justice, even though they seek it, but by showing mercy. This story invites you and me to think of ourselves as those who have been forgiven. We are forgiven debtors living among people both here and elsewhere who are also debtors. To be forgiven means to surrender the power game of playing innocent versus guilty.

In our response to horrific bombings or acts of violence I believe we are called to be peacemakers and agents of reconciliation. Called to believe the impossible. However, I'm realistic to realise as well that to forgive from our hearts even when we can reach the conclusion intellectually that we should, is never easy. However, we must not confuse forgiveness with a call for justice.

I am reminded of the late Michael Ramsay, a former Archbishop of Canterbury who came to our diocesan conference in the early Eighties. He was talking about prayer and those times when we find it difficult to pray. And he said that for him at such times he prayed these words, "dear God I want to pray". And when things are really difficult, "I want to want to pray". And when things are extremely difficult indeed, "I want to want to want to pray." May I suggest, not in any flippant way, we follow a similar pattern as we come to this Eucharist this morning in asking for God's help in forgiving terrorists and perpetrators of evil. Let us pray, "dear God, I want to forgive". And may be, we will need to pray, "dear God I want to want to forgive." And it is conceivable, because the hurts are so deep, and understandably so, we will need to pray, "dear God I want to want to want to forgive".----- And in His good time we can be healed. Amen.