

SERMON: FORGIVENESS AND MERCY

Sunday 13th September 2020 at St Mark's (also 'Zoomed')

Matthew 18: 21-35; Genesis 50: 15-21

Peter came and said to Jesus, '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.' (Matthew 18: 21-22)

Trust Peter to come to Jesus with a *mathematical* solution for forgiving other people! Peter knew the rabbis' teaching that someone who begs forgiveness from his neighbour must not do so more than three times. The teaching went like this: If a man commits an offence once, they forgive him. If he commits an offence a second time, they forgive him again. If he commits an offence a third time, they still forgive him; the fourth time they do NOT forgive. So, taking the mathematical formula of three times you must forgive, doubling it to six, and adding one for good measure, Peter thought he was being very generous with his suggestion of seven times before you're out!

Jesus' reply that the requirement was seventy-seven times was crushing. Where did he get this 'seventy-seven' from? It was in fact from the book of Genesis, from the story of Cain and Abel and their families, but there it referred to acts of vengeance – not forgiveness. (Genesis 4:24). Seventy-seven, the way Jesus meant it, was simply code for no limit.

To emphasise his point, the parable Jesus told was similarly exaggerated. The first servant who owed the ten thousand talents must have been a high-up, a court official in charge of tax revenues or the like. Ten thousand talents was a huge sum in those days – many millions of pounds in today's money. The man was never going to repay it and so the scale of king's mercy and forgiveness was quite remarkable. Contrast the mere hundred denarii owed by the second servant to the man who had just been forgiven so much. This was pocket money, just a few pounds. And yet, instead of being let off the trifling debt, the second servant is grabbed by the throat and thrown into prison until he paid up.

Small wonder that when the king heard about this, he got very angry, revoked the pardon he had given shortly before, and had the man imprisoned and tortured. The parable ends with those chilling words of Jesus: *“So my heavenly Father will do to every one of YOU if you do not forgive your brother and sister from your heart.”*

In our Agape service up to this point, we’ve heard or said the words ‘forgiveness’ and ‘mercy’, or derivations of them, a number of times already. Not just in the liturgy, but in our readings – particularly in the story of Joseph forgiving the brothers who had tried to kill him – and also in the psalm that we said together. And that pattern will continue when we get to our intercessions – Lord in your mercy, the intercessor will say – and most significantly so when we get to the Lord’s Prayer.

There’s an old story of a mother whose son is condemned to die for being a thief. Kneeling on the ground before the Emperor, she pleads with him to show her son mercy. Coldly, the Emperor replies: “This boy is a habitual thief and for what he has done he deserves justice. That justice is death.” The mother begs: “But I am not asking for justice, your Highness, I seek mercy.” “He deserves no mercy,” replies the Emperor, to which the mother says, “It would not be mercy if he DESERVED it.” The Emperor was touched by the mother’s grief and persistence, and the boy was released.

Getting what we deserve has never been central to God’s plan for us. A good job, really. When we look back on our lives, many of us will have regrets. Those missed opportunities and wrong turnings. Those blind alleys, wasted years and ‘what ifs’ and ‘if onlys’. Times of sorrow and – yes – times of sin. Perhaps even times of blatant rebellion towards God. But the God we worship is a God of second chances, third chances, and more. He truly is a merciful God, but a God who commands us to also be merciful with our fellow human beings.

There’s a story of a priest in a country parish who as a young man had committed what he felt was a terrible sin. Although he had asked God’s forgiveness, all his life he carried around the burden of this sin. He just could not be sure that God had really forgiven him.

One day he was told of an elderly woman in his congregation who sometimes had visions. During these visions, he had heard, she would often have conversations with the Lord. After a while, the priest finally plucked up enough courage to visit this woman. She invited him in and offered him a cup of tea. Towards the end of his visit, he put his cup down on the table and looked into the old woman's eyes. "Is it true," he asked her, "that you sometimes have visions?" "Yes", she replied. "Is it also true that during these visions, you sometimes speak with the Lord?" "Yes," she said again. " Well, the next time you have a vision, and speak with the Lord, would you ask Him a question for me?" The woman looked at the priest a little curiously. She had never been asked this before. "Yes, I would be happy to," she answered. "What would you want me to ask Him?"

"Well," the priest began, " would you please ask Him what sin it was that your priest committed as a young man? " And the old woman, quite curious now, readily agreed.

A few weeks passed and the priest went again to visit the woman. After another cup of tea he asked timidly, "Have you had any visions lately?" "Why yes I have," replied the woman. "Did you speak with the Lord?" "Yes." "Did you ask Him what sin I committed as a young man?" "Yes", the woman replied, "I did." The priest, nervous and afraid, hesitated a moment and then asked, "Well, what did the Lord say?"

The old woman looked up into the face of her priest and replied gently, "The Lord told me He could not remember."

I love that story. It brings to life that quaint, Biblical turn of phrase in Jeremiah when God tells his prophet that he will forgive the Israelites their wickedness and "*will remember their sins no more.*" For that priest, like all sinners, it was a life-changing, life-giving moment when the burden of guilt was no more. A moment of being set free. Not set free to go and sin AGAIN, not free from responsibility or the consequences of an action but, like the woman taken in adultery in that Ash Wednesday Gospel story, free from guilt and condemnation and set free *to go and sin no more.*

With no ifs or buts, in response to God's continuous, infinite stream of forgiveness towards us, WE are to forgive the comparatively minor sins and slights we suffer from our fellow human beings. When we get to the Lord's Prayer we will say this: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Those words are emphatic, they are at the heart of the Lord's Prayer, and they cannot be misunderstood. Immediately afterwards, Jesus hammers the message home: *For if you forgive others their trespasses, he says, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.* (Matt 6:14 - 15) Hard words.

A central promise of our Christian life is that all the sins committed before Christ's crucifixion, all the sins committed since, and all the sins yet to be committed - by me, by you, by everyone - are combined together in that one unique sacrifice of God. A sacrifice of mercy and forgiveness. A "ONCE, and for ALL" sacrifice. A sacrifice referred to by the German poet Heinrich Heine on his deathbed: "God will forgive me," the poet whispered, "It's his job." And it's OUR job to do our little bit in return - to forgive those who sin against us. This is not optional. God's forgiveness and human forgiveness are inextricably linked. The great theologian Tom Wright put it like this: "Every time you forgive someone else, you pass on a drop of water out of the bucketful of water God has already given you."

Those people who sin against us, to whom we are commanded to pass on a drop of water from our abundance, may be a motley crew, possibly very difficult to like. Like the habitual thief in the story earlier in this sermon, we may feel they are undeserving of our forgiveness. But we are commanded in no uncertain terms not to withhold it. We have to free ourselves from the pain and bitterness of grudges. Holding grudges and hanging on to hurts consumes us like acid. As someone once said, it's like burning down your own house to get rid of a rat.

We have been forgiven everything and forgiveness and absolution must be available to all who seek it. And all means all; no exceptions. The great Desmond Tutu summed up the reality of God's mercy very well. "We may be surprised at the people we find in heaven," he said. "God has a soft spot for sinners. His standards are quite low." Amen

Richard Gunning – September 2020