

24th Sunday Ordinary Time

17th September 2017

Fr Jarred Mercer

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

The great memoirist and poet Mary Karr is an adult convert to Christianity, and writes about approaching her first communion in her poem 'disgraceland'. In the first half of the poem she paints the picture of her birth, and then moves forward to write this:

*I was hoisted by the heels and swatted, fed
and hauled around. Time-lapse photos show
my fingers grow past crayon outlines,*

my feet come to fill spike heels.

*Eventually, I lurched out
to kiss the wrong mouths, get stewed,*

*and sulk around. Christ always stood
to one side with a glass of water.*

I swatted the sap away.

*When my thirst got great enough to ask,
a clear stream welled up inside,
some jade wave buoyed me forward,*

*and I found myself upright
in the instant, with a garden
inside my own ribs aflourish.*

There, the arbor leafs.

The vines push out plump grapes.

*You are loved, someone said. Take that
and eat it.*

We will never come to terms with God, never come to terms, really feel out, ourselves and one another, until we wholeheartedly and completely accept with joy that our God is deeply in love with sinners. Our God loves sinners.

We're more comfortable with an idea of a god that makes love and mercy and forgiveness about fairness rather than pure grace—about evening the playing field as if in a sort of contest; about settling the score, so that forgiveness actually becomes a new form of vengeance, a new way of 'getting even'.

True forgiveness has to do with grace, not fairness. And true forgiveness is always creative and redemptive. It is not about evening the playing field, settling the score, it is not involved in *contest*. It is pure, unadulterated, *gift*.

Because God loves sinners. Because God is not angry with us. Because Christ offers himself to us again and again and again, with the words, 'you are loved'.

Too often people think of God as a judge standing over and against us. God is judge. But God's judgement actually works through love and grace from within our world—not over and against it. When God judges the world, judges sin, he enters into our humanity in Christ and actually becomes the victim of earthly oppressive powers and judges. God is judged to judge our sin. So to think of God as a judge over and against us, full of rage, as earthly oppressive powers are over and against us, is an anti-Christian view of God's judgement, it is a view of God's judgement that overlooks the cross.

Christ, who claims that he himself is the judge, judges from the stature of humility rather than the position of an overlording power, and subverts overlording powers by himself becoming the victim of them.

So, what are we to do with this parable in Matthew's Gospel, at the end of which Jesus says God will treat anyone who does not forgive others the way the king in the parable treated the unforgiving servant? Harsh, torturous judgement.

What are we to do with the words of Ecclesiasticus: 'Forgive your neighbour the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray'.

Both these readings can give the impression that God's forgiveness of our sins is dependent upon us. But just before telling this parable Jesus essentially says there is no limit on forgiveness when Peter asks how often one should forgive. True forgiveness is limitless as it is a gift not something earned by the one in need of forgiveness.

God is not setting preconditions here, things we must do or say or accomplish, in order to be forgiven. God is not interested in competing with us for our own redemption.

God forgives us and loves us not because we deserve it or earn it, and not even because we ask for it in repentance but because God *is* forgiveness, God *is* mercy. God loves sinners because God is love.

Forgiveness is needed when there is true insult. If I bump into you in the street and you fall over and I immediately help you up and dust you off and make sure you're alright, no real forgiveness is needed. We can just move on. If, however, you fall over and I call you names, spit upon you, kick you while you're down and walk away laughing I will have greatly insulted you and will need to be forgiven for our relationship to be restored.

God is beyond change and is not insulted in the same way. Nothing in God is dependent upon us. God acts only and always in accordance with God's nature which is infinitely and eternally love. And that nature cannot be affected or altered by our actions or our attitudes.

A view of God that places his action in contest or negotiation with ours makes God out to be a thing among other things—something within the boundaries of created life, even if pushing those boundaries to their very edge. But God is no thing, and God's action is free and independent so that nothing can be in competition with God, and to say otherwise is simply idolatry.

But it is not *simply* idolatry. It is also dangerous. It can lead us to understand God's power and action univocally with that of the powers of the world, which can then lead us to justify, or even use, oppressive powers for our own gain or for the good of our 'cause' or opinion, or even just simply our comfort.

So that my lack of forgiveness, or my vengeance or anger at someone who has wronged me is acceptable because I am in the right and they are in the wrong, because this is about competition and contest, and I want to be victorious.

But God doesn't do contest. God does grace. And God's attitude or action towards you does not need to be changed or improved upon by your own attitude or action: God's love for you is unwavering.

We do, however, need repentance. Why? If you wronged me and I forgave you in my heart even though you never admitted you did any wrong or asked for my forgiveness it would be good for me, but you would never experience the benefit of being forgiven. You would not grow or change, and our relationship would not be restored. Our repentance is our receiving of and experiencing God's forgiving love so that redemption happens, so that our relationship is restored, so that we are transformed and renewed, because God's forgiveness and love are always creative and redemptive. God's love makes us new.

So as we come in the joy of repentance to this altar, the place where our sin met God's gracious judgement, let us hear these words: 'You are loved'. 'Take that, and eat it'.