

Sermon for Sunday 13 September: The Unforgiving Servant.

Danny Payne, Ripon College Cuddesdon

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

"I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven."

Listening to Matthew's Gospel over recent weeks, we have heard a number of examples of poor old Peter 'getting it wrong'. Today, we have another: Jesus instructs Peter to forgive in a much greater way than he had expected. Rabbinic tradition held that God would forgive sinners three times but not a fourth, based on their interpretation of a passage from Amos, that God would revoke punishment for penitents for three offences but not four. So, in suggesting seven Peter was being more generous than his contemporaries might expect. But Jesus, as usual, has other ideas.

'Seventy times seven'. It is not quite clear whether this is 'seventy plus seven' or 'seventy multiplied by seven'. Either way, this is a large number and Jesus is suggesting that one would lose count of the number of 'offences' forgiven and become so used to forgiving as a matter of routine that forgiveness would become an automatic response to being wronged rather than a conditional transaction. The forgiveness of God is the love of God for his creation; it is infinite, and, by example, we should forgive infinitely also.

As with many, if not all, of Jesus' charges to his followers, this is not an easy instruction for us to follow. To offer forgiveness is difficult. Our basic human instinct is to seek revenge: 'an eye for an eye'. Forgiveness can seem unfair – if we are wronged we hope for justice and to be vindicated. We can be left angry, hurt or in pain by the actions, words or neglectfulness of one of our siblings, so why should we forgive them? When the situation is reversed, however, we need, and can expect to receive, forgiveness.

The importance of recognising our own sinful nature – the wrongs we do, so easily and so often, to God and to each other – and the need for these to be forgiven is a central

aspect of forgiveness which Peter appears to have overlooked. Peter's question focusses on his need to forgive his brother, but ignores his need to be forgiven by his brother.

As a child taking gifts to school friends for Christmas I remember my mother telling me 'You don't give to receive', cautioning that presents are not always reciprocated so that I wouldn't be disappointed. In the case of forgiveness, however, to give and to receive are intrinsically connected.

In Matthew, chapter 6, Jesus offers an example of the ideal prayer, known to us as the Lord's Prayer, which includes the words:

“Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors”

or, more commonly:

“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us”.

We ask God's forgiveness, acknowledging that we are to forgive those who have wronged us – our debtors, those who have sinned against us. As the writer of Ecclesiasticus tells us:

**“Forgive your neighbour the wrong he has done,
and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray.”**

The Catechism of the Catholic Church takes a strong line on this matter: the outpouring of God's mercy cannot 'penetrate our hearts' as long as we haven't forgiven those who have trespassed against us. Our hearts will be closed if we cannot forgive our siblings. As Paul wrote to the Romans, we do not live to ourselves but to the Lord; God's love is indivisible – how can we love God if we do not love our neighbour?

And so, if we are to be forgiven, we must forgive. The servant owes his master ten thousand talents. One talent was worth 6,000 denarii. We know from other parables that a labourer might expect to earn one denarius for a day's work, so at those wages it could take a servant 6,000 days to earn one talent, yet here we are told the servant owes his master 10,000 talents. The equivalent today might be a worker on minimum wage, earning £65 per day; over 16 years, this would be more than £320,000 for just one talent - a total debt of, wait for it, £3.2 billion! Now, there is obviously no way in which the servant could have borrowed this much money from his master much less

repay the debt, so Jesus is deliberately exaggerating: like the instruction to forgive ‘seventy times seven’ times, Jesus is suggesting an infinite number. And yet, when the servant begs his master to forgive him, the master does just that. The parable reveals the joyful truth that our loving God will forgive us, indeed has already forgiven us through grace, however great our debts, our sins, when we pray.

But how great a contrast with the servant’s own behaviour. Having been released from his enormous debt, he encounters a colleague who owes him money. And does the servant forgive the one who owes him? He does not – he demands payment in full: this is, perhaps, the natural, human response to the difficult, seemingly unjust, instruction to ‘forgive those who trespass against us’.

Of course, his lord knows what the unforgiving servant has done, and he is duly punished. Jesus cautions us all that this is what his heavenly Father will do to us if we do not forgive our siblings, from the heart. As Jesus tells us in Luke, chapter 12:

‘From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required.’

We trust in God’s forgiveness, celebrated at the start of Mass this morning, when we confessed all we have done in thought, word and deed and all we had failed to do, for which our absolution was affirmed. Our relationship with God was reconciled, like the scales of justice being restored to equilibrium. And so we, too, are required to forgive, however much it costs us to do so. We forgive those who trespass against us as God forgives us our trespasses – within in an infinite, generous love – the example which we need to follow. But how should we forgive? The Californian Catholic bishop Robert Barron offers four practical suggestions: to keep our own sins in our minds; to go to confession regularly; to forgive offences quickly; and, to forgive in a concrete way.

Barron’s first two suggestions might help us to focus on our relationship with God: to remember that we are sinful and need to ask for forgiveness – we trust that, with contrite, penitent hearts and a desire to do better, to return to God like the Prodigal Son, God will forgive us our offences, however heavy and burdensome they might be. The third point, to forgive offences quickly, might seem less obvious. Today’s passage from Ecclesiasticus warns us of holding on to anger against others – this is all too easy to do, but forgiveness is not the same as forgetting, it is not pardoning a wrongdoing,

but letting go of the anger and bitterness we can feel against someone who has wronged us, restoring a relationship rather than allowing it to be permanently scarred. We need to let go by forgiving others quickly. And finally, to forgive in a concrete way: as a reserved Englishman, I might too quickly dismiss Bishop Barron's recommendation of sending a potted plant to someone I have forgiven as being American sentimentalism, but his point stands – if you can, tell the person you have forgiven them, send a note or card, make it clear. Making it clear will make it deeper and more meaningful, releasing us from our pain and anger, restoring the balance of our relationship through reconciliation with each other, and with God.

We know that it is often not easy, and we might need to try to forgive over and over again – perhaps 77 times or more - before forgiveness really does happen from the heart, but this is nothing compared with the abundant grace with which God will always forgive each one of us every time we ask.

Amen.