

## Holy Trinity Cuckfield. Proper 19 Year A .13<sup>th</sup> September 2020 (Vicky Peattie)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart Be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my rock and my Redeemer.

Today's lectionary readings continue the recent theme - how to maintain right relationships within the Christian community.... today's OT and Gospel readings are about forgiveness - God's loving generous gift to us, through Jesus' death and resurrection – the forgiveness of sins.

From our collect for this week *'Merciful God, Your Son came to save us and gave us life through the cross, may we trust in your mercy and know your love'*

Our calling as members of the Christian community is to spread the good news of this wondrous gift to others. To forgive someone, means to release them, to untie their bonds, to heal them, as Jesus did throughout his earthly ministry. Forgiving is 'for giving'!

A quote from Bishop Desmond Tutu, as chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee in S Africa under Nelson Mandela, after the atrocities suffered under apartheid: He says: *'to forgive is the best form of self-interest...if you can find it in yourself to forgive, then you're no longer chained to the perpetrator. You can move on, and you can even help the perpetrator to become a better person too.'*

Total forgiveness is a choice, a choice to be godly, overcoming human temptation for revenge. Just like Joseph in the Book of Genesis: his brothers had thrown him in a pit, then sold him to some passing Ishmaelites. For Joseph, this meant a rapid change - from the favourite younger son, to slavery in a foreign land, then years of imprisonment, over 20 years passed before his God-given gift of interpreting dreams led Pharaoh to appoint him as governor of Egypt. His childhood dream of his siblings bowing down before him came true.

When Joseph revealed himself to them, there was an emotional reunion with tears and compassion, forgiveness, and generous provision for them, no hint of vengeance. From today's reading Gen 50. After the death of their father Jacob, the siblings are afraid that Joseph might seek retribution after all, but he says: *v<sup>20</sup> Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.*

Joseph held fast to the belief that God was in charge of his destiny all along. God's plans and timing saved not just his immediate family, but the whole nation. How different the story of the Old Testament might have been, had Joseph not forgiven them, instead of following God's will.

From our epistle today (Romans 14) Paul prayed for young churches in many places, and wrote to them addressing their particular needs, even ones he hadn't visited, as with the letter to the Romans.

The Context: Roman Emperor Claudius issued an edict ordering the expulsion of the Jews from Rome. After his death in AD 54 they were allowed to return– with the new dynamics of Jewish and Gentile Christians in the house churches, they began to quarrel about observance of food laws, fasting , feast days, some claiming the moral high ground for their customs and practices. Paul's message to the young church - all worship is acceptable as long as it is done in honour of the Lord.

– *don't put a stumbling block in way of another believer ... God welcomes all: (v8) ... for 'Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.'*

Six months ago the church throughout the world experienced a massive change, with the pandemic. Buildings were closed down, not something it could prepare for in advance. But an opportunity emerged, with new technology, they reached out to those on the margins, those who wouldn't consider going inside a church building, or maybe too frail to go to church. As at Cuckfield where you welcome us 'wherever we are' at the start of the services, all are welcome.

Moving on to our Gospel reading- Matthew, chapter 18 - Peter asks Jesus *'if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?'* Jewish tradition prescribed three times, three strikes and you're out ... Peter suggests more than double that .... Seven.

Jesus answers: *'Not seven, but, seventy-seven times'* In other words, forgive again and again, don't even count. This triggers a parable – *'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.'*

One slave owed a colossal ten thousand talents... more than he could ever hope to repay...he begs for mercy <sup>27</sup> *'And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.* But that slave then went out and dealt mercilessly with a fellow-servant who owed him a trifling sum - and for his lack of mercy was utterly condemned.

Jesus says. <sup>35</sup> *'So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'*

Forgiving from the heart- a deliberate well thought out decision, an ongoing decision to forgive continuously in all circumstances. From Jesus' summary of the law (As Paul pointed out in his Letter to the Romans 13:9 we heard last week) *'love your neighbour as yourself'*. That means you have to love yourself – I sometimes struggle with this sometimes and I am not alone. A comment by Angela Ashwin, writer and retreat leader, resonated with me. She refers to an entry in her journal: *'Sometimes looking back through my life, what I see is at most ' a motley offering of botched efforts and idiotic mistakes' . (Angela Ashwin, 'Faith in the Fool. Risk and delight in the Christian Adventure')*

Fear and regret from the past, unresolved anger, misfortune, loss, feuds or hurt from others especially in family or church, can lead to unresolved guilt. It can be a stumbling block to believing that God can really forgive us. When we confess our own failings to God, we have to 'let go', accept our forgiveness and leave the rest to God, our loving Father.

When he gave us the Lord's Prayer Jesus told us to pray: *'forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors'*. As Tom Wright says *'that isn't a bargain we make with God. It's a fact of human life.... a way of life, God's way of life and the way to life.'* (Tom Wright: "Simply Good News")

Our mission is to draw others to the light, to show them, by word and deed, that forgiveness that opens the door to God's kingdom coming on earth, as it is in heaven. As we heard last week, we are to be like the saints in the stained-glass window, people that the light shines through.

I would like to share with you a sonnet by priest and poet, Malcolm Guite on the Lord's Prayer:

*Forgive as we forgive: the prayer you give us,  
Comes home so close, yet radiates so far  
We set the limits on our own forgiveness;  
As generous or grudging as we are.  
The wounds we give and take in all our weakness,  
The injuries that smoulder, burning slow,  
The sins that others visited upon us,  
Are ours to hold or utterly let go.  
You tell the story of the wretched debtor,  
The one forgiven everything he owed,  
Who then exacted payment, to the letter,  
From one who could not bear the given load.  
Oh lift my given load that I, forgiven,  
Might give away forgiveness, free as heaven .*

*(Malcolm Guite: Parable and Paradox. Sonnets and Sayings of Jesus and other poems)*