

Trinity XIV Year A (Proper 19/OT24) 2020

I knew a family in Hove who were religious. They attended worship regularly, and I saw the three children, a boy and two girls, grow up. As they entered adulthood, the son did something very foolish. He took his father's credit card and spent a great deal of money. I don't know the ins and outs, but his parents cast him out of the family and never sought reconciliation. Some time later the father died suddenly of a heart attack, but the son was not allowed to his father's funeral. He had been cast into outer darkness – to use the language Jesus sometimes illustrates parables with – and there was no return, certainly as far as his mother was concerned. I have always remembered and been saddened by it, and I sometimes wonder what happened to him.

Both the OT and Gospel readings focus on forgiveness - Joseph's of his brothers and then in the Gospel reading where Jesus uses a vivid parable as a call to each of us to know God's overwhelming and limitless forgiveness within our lives and the call to mirror this in our own dealings. This is sometimes an exceedingly difficult call and usually a lifetime's struggle.

Forgiveness is a default setting in the Bible - a running theme constantly revisited and reiterated. I always think that the Story of Joseph is one where we see a great deal of the psychology of relationships revealed in the way the different characters relate to each other: the jealousy of the older brothers, the sexual aggression of Potiphar's wife, Jacob's fierce demonstration of his love for the young Benjamin – the replacement to the son he thinks he has lost – and then the power game Joseph displays as governor of Egypt to his brothers – mere nomadic shepherds. In today's reading we have, amidst much crying (also a feature of the latter part of this account) a final denouement and reconciliation as they come together. It is in this familial moment of distress that ultimately brings about an inner peace.

As brothers and sisters in Christ we are called to acknowledge that we are called to be builders of bridges rather than walls and Paul calls us to remember this in the Letter to the Romans by reminding us that we are ultimately accountable to God. We are called to imitate God's forgiveness. How? How can we possibly understand such grace?

Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of our Faith, pours out himself for the life of the world, and this is where, I think, we must start in our approach to forgiveness. The capacity to forgive is psychologically far healthier for us than allowing a constant sore to fester, but nevertheless we might find it difficult to live up to. What does it mean to display God's forgiveness within our own lives and relationships?

In the parable Jesus uses exaggeration to draw us to know just how great God's love is. Some Biblical scholars point out that the sum owed by the servant to the king is unbelievable. It would represent about 150,000 years' worth of salary for a daily labourer of the time. It's a debt almost approaching our national Covid borrowing! However, Jesus quotes this fantastic sum to highlight first the overflowing grace of forgiveness offered by the king, but then the servant's wretched refusal to forgive a reasonable debt owed him by a fellow slave.

Jesus is pointing out just how wondrous God's compassion actually is. It is unconditional and limitless. It is never withdrawn in the face even of the most terrible failings. The greatest example we can draw on to understand God's forgiveness is reveal on the cross by Jesus. It is a poured-out love – forgiveness uttered even as hands and feet are pierced with nails. *'Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.'* The example of Jesus is one for us to constantly ponder and seek to follow within our lives.

Again I pose the question: how can we hope to follow such an example? I think this starts with the inner knowledge of both the knowledge of God's forgiveness within our own lives and then adopting this in our own relationships. The first servant can't take on board the generosity he is shown. He doesn't recognise the freedom proffered him in his dealings with others. How can his own self-healing take place if he is unable to render the same to others?

In the Lord's Prayer Jesus teaches us to say, 'forgive us our trespasses and we forgive those who trespass against us.' This might sound like an entry in a ledger, a balancing act on scales. What it actually calls us to know is that we, knowing the grace of forgiveness, are called on a journey where we can forgive one another.

Is this an impossible task. I told you about one family's experience of brokenness. How can we forgive those who, for instance, brough about 9/11, or the monstrous behaviour of members of Isis, the behaviour of the Chinese State. How can I forgive.....? I leave the gap for you to fill. It would be foolish to demand that forgiveness should be displayed by Christians in the stark form displayed in the parable. The truth is that the ability or capacity to forgive is a grace in itself. It will, as I said, be a lifelong journey for most people. Prayer and supplication are tools to enable us to seek that forgiveness comes from the heart, as Jesus teaches us. In seeking to journey with him, heeding his words from the cross, we too have the capacity to grow through grace into the likeness of Christ.

In this age which shuns dogma and distrusts words, there is nevertheless a deep longing. Yet this longing is confused – a longing which recognises a void and desires its filling. Yet new dogmas turn out, ultimately, to be mere chimeras. Fulfilment is found in Jesus Christ – the desire of nations, the word incarnate – in whom is found gracious healing. Ultimately, through him we are led even deeper into union with God and full communion with those we forgive.

A prayer of St John Chrysostom:

You have laid on me, O Christ, a spell of longing, you have charmed me with a love divine; Consume my sins with immaterial fire; be pleased to fill me with your sweet delights. Then I shall magnify your advent within my life as the one in whom divine forgiveness is revealed, O gracious Lord and God. Amen



Christ the healer - Part of Cathedral of Our Lady of Chartres, constructed between 1194 and 1220,

Genesis 50:15-21

¹⁵ Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, 'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?' ¹⁶ So they approached^[a] Joseph, saying, 'Your father gave this instruction before he died, ¹⁷ "Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you." Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.' Joseph wept when they spoke to him. ¹⁸ Then his brothers also wept,^[b] fell down before him, and said, 'We are here as your slaves.' ¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? ²⁰ 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. ²¹ So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.' In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

Romans 14:1-12

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions. ² Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. ³ Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgement on those who eat; for God has welcomed them.

⁴ Who are you to pass judgement on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord^[b] is able to make them stand.

⁵ Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. ⁶ Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God.

⁷ We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. ⁸ If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

¹⁰ Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister?^[c] Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister?^[d] For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God.^[e] ¹¹ For it is written,

'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,

and every tongue shall give praise to^[f] God.' ¹² So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Matthew 18:21-Forgiveness

²¹ Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church^[a] sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' ²² Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven^[b] times.'

²³ 'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵ and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." ²⁹ Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." ³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'