

FORGIVENESS THAT IS INFINITE

Genesis 50. 15-21

Romans 14. 1-12

Matthew 18. 21-35

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

‘How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ Our Lord answered Peter,
‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.’

For Jesus, forgiveness is not a quantifiable event. It is a quality, a way of being, a way of living, a way of loving, a way of relating, a way of thinking and seeing. It is nothing less than the way of Christ. If we are to follow our Lord, then it must become our way as well. ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.’

Does that mean the drunk driver? Yes. The cheating spouse? Yes. The lying businessman? Yes. The racist? Yes. The rapist? Yes. The bully? Yes. The abusive parent? Yes. The greedy corporation? Yes. Even terrorists? Yes.

Here in Guernsey, we might not have thought of it, but just two days ago we stood at a difficult and seemingly impossible place. We stood at the intersection of the nineteenth anniversary of the ‘9/11’ tragedy and today’s gospel. On Tuesday morning 11th September 2001, four coordinated attacks against the United States were committed by the Islamist terrorist group Al-Qaeda. The attacks resulted in nearly three thousand deaths, over twenty-five thousand injuries and substantial long-term health consequences, in addition to at least ten billion dollars in infrastructure and property damage. The memories, the images, the anger, the fear, the pain and losses all intersect with Jesus’s teaching on forgiveness. Both are real. Both are true.

The deeper truth, however, is that we would still be standing at that same intersection even if '9/11' had never occurred. We stand at that intersection every day of our lives. Look at the history of the world and you will see the Holocaust, the Killing Fields of Cambodia, the genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda, racial discrimination, economic oppression, wars and torture in Afghanistan and Iraq. Look at your own lives and you will find broken promises, hurt feelings, betrayals, harsh words, physical and emotional wounds. Every one of us could tell stories of being hurt or victimised by another. Beneath the pain, the wounds, the losses and the memories lies the question of forgiveness.

Everyone, I suspect, is in favour of forgiveness, at least in principle. It was C S Lewis who wrote, 'everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until there is something to forgive.'¹ What do we do then? What do we do when there is something to forgive?

Some will strike back seeking revenge. Some will run away from life and relationships. Some will let anger and resentment paralyse them and fester like a wound. I don't say that out of criticism or judgement of someone else, but out of my own experience. I've done them all. I know how hard forgiveness can be. Like you, I too struggle with it and often avoid it. I also know that none of those answers is the way of Christ. All of them leave us stuck in the past, tied to the evil of another and bereft of the future that God wants to give us.

Forgiveness is the only way forward. It does not mean that we forget, condone or approve of what was done. It does not mean that we ignore or excuse cruelty or injustice. It means that we are *released* from them. We let go of the thoughts and fantasies of revenge. We look to the future rather than to the past. We try to see and love as God sees and loves. Forgiveness is a way in which we align our life with

¹ C S Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1952), p. 104.

God's life. To withhold forgiveness is to put ourselves in the place of God, the ultimate judge to whom all are accountable.²

God's forgiveness and human forgiveness are integrally related. This is more than apparent in today's parable. The king forgives his slave an extraordinary amount. Ten thousand talents represented about three thousand years of work at the ordinary daily wage of our Lord's time. If we believe the parable, it seems that there is no debt that is too large to be forgiven. This man, this debtor, was forgiven. That's what the kingdom of heaven is like; and that's how our God is. The slave, however, refused to forgive his fellow slave one hundred denarii, which represented about three months of work at the ordinary daily wage. Too often that's what our world is like; and frequently, it is how we are. In that refusal the forgiven slave lost his own forgiveness.

This should not be news to us. We know it well. We acknowledge and pray it every Sunday and I'll bet most of us pray it every day. 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.' We pray those words with ease and familiarity, but do we *live* our prayer? Do our actions support our request? 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'

That's a lot of forgiveness; but the pain of the world, our island and individuals is great. We need to be forgiven ourselves probably as much (or even more) than those whom we forgive. Forgiving those who trespass against us is the salve that begins to heal our wounds. It may not change the one who hurt us, but I promise you this. Our lives will be more alive, more grace-filled, more whole and more God-like for having forgiven another.

² Cf. Rom 14. 10, 12.

Forgiveness creates space for new life. Forgiveness is an act of hopefulness and resurrection for the one who forgives. It is the healing of our soul and life. Forgiveness takes us out of darkness into light, from death to life. It disentangles us from the evil of another. It is the refusal to let our future be determined by the past. It is the letting go of the thoughts, the hatred and the fear that fill us so that we might live and love again.

So how do we begin to forgive? There is no easy road to forgiveness. Don't let anyone tell you, 'Just give it up to God. Forgive and forget.' Simplistic trite answers only demean those who suffer and pick at the wound. Forgiving another takes time and work. It is something that we must practise every day. It begins with recognition and thanksgiving that we have been forgiven. We are the beneficiaries of the Crucified One. Hanging between two thieves, Jesus prayed, 'Father, forgive them.'³ That is the cry of infinite forgiveness, a cry that we are to echo in our families, our work places, our parishes and in our day-to-day life.

Forgiveness does not originate in us. It begins with God. That's what the slave who refused to forgive didn't understand. It was not about him. It's about God. We do not choose to forgive. We only choose to *share the forgiveness we have already received*. Then we choose again, and then again, and then yet again. For most of us forgiveness is a process that we live into. Sometimes, however, we just cannot. The pain is too much, the wound is too raw and the memories are too real. On those days we choose to *want* to forgive; and some days we choose to *want to want* to forgive. Then there are those days when all we can do is choose to *want to want to want* to forgive. But we choose; because that's the choice that Christ made.

How many times must we choose to forgive? Tell me this. How many times have you been hurt by the actions or words of another? How many times has anger or

³ Cf. Lk 23. 34.

fear controlled you? How many times has the thought of revenge filled you? How many times have you shuddered at the sight, the name, or the memory of another? How many times have you replayed in your head an argument with another? That's how many times we choose. With each choosing, we move a step closer to forgiveness. Then one day, God willing, we will meet, all of us – both victims and perpetrators – as happy thieves in the Paradise of God, the Father of us all.

‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.’

Amen.