

## Sunday 17th September 2017

### What do we think about forgiveness?

**Genesis 50: 15 - 21;**

**Psalm 103: 8 - 13;**

**Romans 14: 1 - 12;**

**Matthew 18: 21 – 35**

**By Leslie Spatt**

Forgiveness...yes...tricky, isn't it. There's so many things going on in the readings this morning: judgement, forgiveness, inclusiveness, tolerance; and of these, perhaps forgiveness – both offering and accepting it – is the hardest. Forgiveness is something that most of us will say that we believe in and practice. Easy to say but extremely hard to do and sincerely, truthfully mean it. We might also wonder what “genuine” forgiveness is. Going alongside that, we might wonder if God's forgiveness is the same as human forgiveness.

Forgiving is not forgetting – they're definitely different things although one might go with the other. Forgiving frequently happens very close to the wrong that's been done, and is a much more immediate action than forgetting. But hopefully, forgetting doesn't mean that “it” – whatever “it” is – hangs around forever, corroding our emotional or physical lives. Being unable to forget, carrying grudges, is almost always time wasting and mind consuming, leading to feelings of getting revenge rather than a more helpful action of looking for justice in putting wrongs to right.

Joseph's brothers are in a really bad state, saying “What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him,” and indeed they did do him wrong purely out of jealousy – selling him off to slave traders, not caring what happened to him, letting their father think he was dead. And years later, before he dies, their father Jacob gives them words to ask forgiveness. Joseph's reply is generous: 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 sees the ultimate good coming out of their terribly wrong actions; even though at the time he was hauled off to slavery and stuck in prison he probably didn't see it that way. He hasn't forgotten about the nasty things, but is able to overcome them with the forgiveness which some of us might not have felt in

the same situation. How easy it would have been for Joseph to say, “nope, tough; you have to pay for my years of misery and now I’m going to do the same to you. You can all go home and starve.”

When we come to the Gospel reading, the familiar phrase, Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times leaps out at us as an example of the type of forgiveness which Jesus expects the builders of God’s heavenly kingdom to display. The number isn’t meant to be taken literally, of course – it’s so big that it really means “without limit”; something we probably find it almost impossible to take on board. So it’s a bit odd that the parable which follows isn’t quite what we might expect, where the ending is more or less a description of payback for wrongdoings. After all, it’s one of those stories in Matthew which wonders what the kingdom of heaven is like. Does the kingdom of heaven include retribution?

Interestingly, many scholars think that most of this parable is very close to what Jesus would have said; his genuine words or even close to them being relatively unusual in the Gospels, which have frequently been constructed to reflect the editor’s own theological agenda. A lot of evidence for hearing the voice of the historical Jesus is that the story carries elements of exaggeration and conflict – which he often uses to make people sit up and pay attention. He offers difficult ideas, contradicting the accepted behaviour of a society too often concerned with the letter of the law and not the spirit of it.

Jesus would have challenged public opinion – effectively asking them if what they do is what God wants for the heavenly kingdom. Retribution? Revenge? Being literal about the written law instead of looking at mitigating circumstances? Forgiveness was probably not a key element of 1st century Middle Eastern society – but Jesus says that because the nature of God is to be forgiving, thus humans must follow this pattern as well. Be merciful as your heavenly father is merciful, it says elsewhere in the Gospels.

In a world where normal justice of the time - imprisonment - would have been applied to a debt situation, the king behaves differently, he shows both compassion and mercy in response to the slave’s pleading and cancels the massive debt. Isn’t this a sign of the Kingdom of Heaven! We’re shocked, then, when the story carries on to show us the outrageous behaviour of the forgiven slave towards one of his own. Surely this can’t be the right way to behave, and won’t he then be punished for not being forgiving in turn?

We, the readers and listeners, are invited by Jesus to choose the right way to respond to mercy. The king says, “Should you not have had mercy on your

fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?” We might feel some sense of “justice is done” when we read that other slaves have reported Mr Unforgiving back to the king, and he’s got what he deserved in the first place! As God, represented by the king, has shown such immense forgiveness, the one forgiven ought to do the same in much lesser circumstances. The slaves, perhaps representing members of Matthew’s Christian community, are obliged to follow this pattern of offering forgiveness to each other.

How much might that display of forgiveness cost the king – would he be seen as weak? One has to wonder if his subjects would respect him if he forgave a slave, the lowest of the low. And if we think that the king symbolises God, how much does it cost God; in comparison with God we are indeed all slaves. It’s an interesting theological problem: is God - the king - weak for forgiving us – the slaves - all the time, just because we ask and God loves us? Would we be more comfortable with an image of God who sets definite boundaries, is stern and judges us all the time? Are we worthy of forgiveness?

The moral of the story isn’t anything to do with literally criticising the social system of the day; imprisoning people for debt was quite normal – and persisted right up to Victorian times in this country. No – Matthew here reinforces the saying of his version of the Lord’s Prayer “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” There are many kinds of debt. The Lord’s Prayer might well have applied literally to monetary debt; but is now really asking God to forgive the bad things we’ve done – or the good we’ve failed to do – for our neighbour. God is a forgiving God, and we are expected to follow this example, be as merciful to those who owe us as God is to us.

There’s an odd tone to both this parable and the parallel petition in the Lord’s Prayer. Matthew slants this parable in the direction of a legalistic interpretation. Is Matthew’s version of the Lord’s Prayer, for example, actually asking God to forgive us only in accordance with how much we forgive others? Does forgiveness depend on the quantity of forgiveness or the quality of it? Personally, I don’t think quantity enters into it. The symbolic “seventy-seven times” at the start of the parable seems to say that we should carry on being forgiving without doing any record-keeping.

Perhaps Jesus meant the parable to show that we can’t mess with forgiveness without creating undesirable consequences. God forgives, so we must respond with the same thing, it isn’t optional. Peter asks, How often should I forgive? As many as seven times? Jesus said to him, Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. As a mark of the Kingdom, it just has to be offered,

again and again. How hard this must be to do even once, for someone who's had their life permanently changed by the actions of other humans. Those who have been wounded, beaten up, cheated out of life savings, betrayed by a partner, the victims of undeserved tragedy and violence. Could any one of us face a person who's wronged us and say "I forgive you" and really mean it. I'm not sure I could.

For us, Jesus reflects the loving and forgiving nature of a God who wants us to build the sort of kingdom on earth to live life in the best and fullest way possible. A God who invites us to consider what the negative results of selfishness, vindictiveness and ignoring mercy might mean. Jesus reminds us that we have only two great commandments: Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbour as yourself. That's all that ultimately matters, says Jesus. Forgiveness is part of that kind of love. Even if we can forgive, honestly, only seven times...it's a start, isn't it.

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