

Sunday 13th September 2020

Sermon by Rev. Peter Lyth

A prayer of adoration and thanksgiving

God of love and grace beyond our telling,
we bring our thankful hearts to you,
acknowledging that without you we are nothing
and with you we can be so much more...
thankful that you care for us, and love us beyond measure;
that you have endless patience with us;
that you teach us time and time again
what it is to be committed to you and your way...
thankful that you reveal yourself to us in myriad ways,
to inspire us and evoke within us a heartfelt response...
thankful that while all this is for everyone who will come to you and accept you,
it is for me – for me! – and may I know it deep within.
With overflowing hearts, hear our prayer.

Amen.

Read Matthew 18: 21-35

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Forgiveness is difficult. We all have it drilled into us as Christians that we should forgive one another. We know it intellectually, yet the reality can be different. Being cheated on by a spouse or being defrauded by a trusted business partner can cause shame and anger, the wronged party ends up feeling bruised, diminished and not good enough.

There are some amazing stories of forgiveness around. On 15th March 2019, Brenton Tarrant murdered 51 worshippers at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand

During his conviction hearings, the court heard from 24 victims of the attack.

Farid Ahmed survived the shooting in Christchurch, but his wife was killed by the gunman. Hosne Ahmed was shot as she ran back into the mosque to try to save her husband, who uses a wheelchair. She was 44. He says he forgives her killer and will pray for him. He has become something of a symbol of Christchurch's Muslim community's ability to forgive.

Janna Ezat, whose son Hussein Al-Umari was murdered at Al Noor Mosque, told the gunman she forgives him.

"I decided to forgive you Mr Tarrant because I don't have hate. I don't have revenge," she said directly to the terrorist.

"In our Muslim faith we say . . . we are able to forgive, forgive.

"I forgive you. Damage was done and Hussein will never be here so I have only one choice to forgive you."

Tarrant nodded in acknowledgment of her words before blinking profusely and wiping one of his eyes.

It was his only show of emotion during the day.

Many years earlier, in 1987, a bomb went off in Enniskillen, in Northern Ireland, planted by the IRA. Gordon Wilson lost his daughter in the attack. The 60-year-old draper publicly forgave those who had planted the bomb and said he would pray for them. He also begged that no-one take revenge for Marie's death and pleaded with loyalists not to do so. He became a famous peace campaigner whose work contributed to the Northern Ireland agreement some years later.

There are many other stories of people who have forgiven in a manner that most of us would consider, "above and beyond". Yet there is a danger that in telling people that they must forgive can be counter productive as they can accumulate guilt alongside the hurt. I certainly am not here to set the bar so high.

The passage from Matthew's Gospel is in response to Peter's question on forgiveness – should he forgive them up to seven times? Jesus responds firstly that there should be no limit – seventy times seven should be read as "a huge number" rather than merely 490 times. Forgiveness cannot be quantified. Jesus then goes on to relate a parable which illustrates this.

The story involves a servant that is indebted to his master. We lose the impact of the degree to which he is forgiven until we realise that the amount he owed was the wages of a day labourer for 150,000 years! Immediately we realise that his promise to repay is completely absurd and unrealistic. But then, much to our surprise, he reacts completely differently to the man who owes him a comparatively small sum. It really jars doesn't it?

Why does he do that? It makes him seem a really nasty piece of work. No wonder his master reacts the way that he does.....

But, as is always the way with parables, there's more to it than that. We start off with the last verse which raises a very important question, namely, "If I do not forgive those who injure me, will God withhold forgiveness?" – Is Divine forgiveness therefore conditional on us letting go of our grudges? It might superficially appear so.

But let's look again at the parable. There are a number of points that we can make.

The first is this. Human forgiveness is rooted in God's forgiveness. The King has forgiven his servant a vast fortune – far and away more than he could ever repay. In the same way, there is no way to measure God's generosity of grace. When it comes to it, neither "seventy times seven" or ten thousand talents measures up to God's grace.

But secondly, if we look at the first servant's response to this remarkable act of generosity, it seems wrong. It doesn't seem appropriate at all. There's no rejoicing, no gratitude, no celebrating with his wife and children who undoubtedly have escaped prison. All we find out is that he refuses the requests of his colleague. He has not "discovered" the idea of forgiveness. And actually, this has been apparent from early on. In his discussion with his master, he seems to deal with it on a commercial basis by offering to pay back all he owes, even though that is clearly impossible. He is thinking it is about justice, although this would never work. He has not understood the idea of mercy. He has received grace but not understood it.

Forgiveness is not the same as justice. He has dealt with the debt as a transaction, not realising, or being unwilling to accept that he should be at the mercy of his master. And so he cannot see that he has received a true gift.

This spills over into the his treatment of his colleague. He cannot see him as in the same situation as himself and cannot show mercy as he has been shown. In many ways he has dehumanised him, turning him into the enemy.

So that final verse tells us that forgiveness is a matter of the heart – a transformation of the person who has received it. That is something that the first servant just didn't get.

So what about those of us that have been injured by another in some way and are battling with shame and alienation? This parable tells us of the incredible kindness of God, who deals with us not through justice, but far more than that through mercy. We are all forgiven debtors to a greater or lesser extent living with others who are also fellow debtors. Instead of playing some kind of power game of innocent versus guilty, we are invited to join a fellowship of sinners that are all forgiven by God.

Prayer of intercession

Jesus' parables inspire us to pray for those who forgive us,
for big things and small...

for those who do not forgive, no matter what...

for those who do not know how to forgive...

for those who do not want to forgive...

for those who have not been forgiven.

God of forgiveness, for them all, we pray.

Amen.

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