

*The journey of forgiveness*

‘Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven...’ - so we sang near the beginning of our service this morning in the words of that well-known hymn, ‘Praise my soul the king of heaven.’ And it is that word ‘forgiven’ that captures our attention as we consider today’s passage from Matthew’s Gospel and we are reminded of the centrality of forgiveness to the Christian Gospel: our forgiveness from God and Jesus command that we forgive one another. Earlier in this chapter Jesus has been teaching about conflict among his disciples, the church. So Peter asks Jesus, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?’ Now, apparently the rule of thumb taught by the rabbis was that you should forgive someone three times – three strikes and then you’re out! So Peter is pushing the boundaries somewhat by suggesting, as he does, seven times. That’s over twice the requirement - to which Jesus replies, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times seven.’ In other words, forgiveness is not subject to a mathematical formula or equation. Forgiveness belongs to the realm of grace, and grace is boundless and incalculable.

Jesus then goes on to tell this story about two servants who both owe money. The first owes his master a colossal amount: 10,000 talents. This is a staggering sum. It would take your average labourer 150,000 years to earn that much – it’s a ridiculous amount. But his master forgives him the debt. This servant, however, is owed a trivial sum by another servant, and he goes after him and despite his pleas has him thrown into jail. The point is clear. God is gracious and forgiving towards us. We have all been forgiven over and over again, so we ought to forgive others. Indeed the first servant is punished by his master for his hard-heartedness, and we are warned by Jesus: ‘So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from the heart.’

Now, we could discuss the details of this story and there are difficulties that arise. For example, the wicked servant was forgiven this huge debt that he owed – but he was not forgiven for his treatment of his fellow servant. He was imprisoned until he could pay off his huge debt. But does that not set limits to forgiveness? Should this bad servant not have been forgiven even his harsh treatment of his fellow servant? Likewise at the end we are warned that we will be treated like the bad servant if we do not forgive others – but again, may we not sometimes be forgiven for not forgiving? If you suffered terrible, grievous wrongs: forgiveness can be very hard indeed. Last Friday was September 11<sup>th</sup>, a date seared on the world’s memory. Imagine you lost a loved one in the Twin Towers. How hard would it be to forgive the perpetrators – can we not be forgiven sometimes for not forgiving?

I want, however, to probe this subject of forgiveness a bit deeper for a host of questions arise. What does it mean to forgive someone? What are we doing when we forgive? How do I know if I have forgiven someone or not? What if I am still angry with them? Is anger compatible with forgiveness? Or again, does forgiving mean that we act as if the wrongdoing had never been committed? Are we to treat the perpetrator as if they had never done what they did? We talk sometimes of ‘forgive and forget’: does forgiving mean that we act as if the offence had never happened? And how does forgiveness relate to the Law? If someone mugs me in the street and is caught, does forgiveness mean that I should not press charges? These are difficult questions. And the problem is that we speak of forgiveness without pinning down what it actually means and what it requires of us.

So let’s think for a moment about what it might mean to forgive someone who has wronged you. And I think of what we read of the first Christian martyr, Stephen. As he was stoned to death, lynched by a mob, he prayed, ‘do not lay this sin against them’. And I would suggest that forgiveness means that rather than hold the evil someone has done to you against them, you hold on rather to the hope that they should be redeemed and restored. In other words, rather than locking the wrong-doer into the dungeon of their sin, your concern is for the release of the better person that they could become and who will not do such things.

Let me give you an example. You might have heard of a man called Gordon Wilson, who held the hand of his dying daughter in the rubble and debris after the IRA exploded a bomb in Enniskillen in Northern Ireland on Remembrance Sunday in 1987, as the town gathered to commemorate those who had fallen in wars. It was an appalling, unspeakable act. But Wilson said afterwards of the perpetrators who murdered his daughter, "I bear them no ill will... I will pray for them every night... dirty talk achieves nothing." There is forgiveness in a nutshell. Firstly, 'I bear them no ill will' - that is the refusal to hold on to the evil they have done, to lay their sin against them; and then, 'I will pray for them every night': that is the longing that they might be restored and redeemed to become better people. And where, as in 9/11, the perpetrators are dead we still refuse to lock them into their crimes, believing that in the hands of God all are redeemable.

Let's delve a bit deeper into this, bit by bit. Firstly, forgiving means not locking people into the wrong they have done. And this is partly because we have to recognise that as human beings we are complex creatures. We are influenced by everything from our genes, to our parents, to our upbringing, to our experiences in life. So it is well-known that paedophiles are often people who have themselves been abused: we are all damaged goods and the damage affects our behaviour. And that does not mean that we do not hold people responsible for their actions. It does not mean that we excuse everything, but we recognise that only God can ultimately judge a human being. That is why Jesus warns us against judging others, because only God knows a person's full story.

Secondly, however, we believe that people can be changed. They can be redeemed: they can be released from captivity to their wrong-doing. They can come home to their true selves, like that wayward son in the story Jesus told that we call The Prodigal Son, who came home, home to his father, home to his true identity. In the story, as his father puts a cloak on his shoulders and a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet he is restored to the truth about himself. Indeed, this is why I believe that Christians should oppose the death penalty. The death penalty defines a person as what they *have* become, and not what they *may yet* become. The death penalty is a denial that people can change and become the person God has created them to be. It is to abandon hope. So to forgive does not mean that someone should not be dealt with by the State through the due process of the Law if what they have done constitutes a crime. And certainly there are voices in Scripture that speak of punishment, and sentencing is a kind of punishment. But Scripture also speaks powerfully of redemption, of restoration, and God's final word takes us beyond punishment to restoration in the offender of the divine image that they bear. And our justice system should reflect that. In the Bible Israel suffers for its sins by being cast into exile and that is a kind of punishment. But exile is never the last word. Prophets like Isaiah are insistent that Israel be not finally defined by its sins, for God holds out to Israel the promise of restoration and homecoming. That is God's final word.

Just, briefly, three of other points about forgiveness... Firstly, it is certainly true that forgiveness can be liberating for the 'victim'. The trouble with holding on to someone's wrongdoing, imprisoning them in it, is that you get imprisoned there too. You are taken captive by the sin of another. Heaven knows, I am not being judgmental for I have no idea how I could cope if I found myself in their situations, but you come upon people who have suffered grievous wrongs and who cannot forgive, and often there is this terrible bitterness, this terrible hardness that is further damaging their lives. It's as if their hearts have become calloused and their anger and bitterness have corroded their spirits. That is what vengeance does: it festers and destroys the avenger as much as it destroys the perpetrator. And to forgive can be a glorious release. Ultimately, however, forgiveness is not about the sinned against. It's primarily about the perpetrator and their redemption.

Secondly, forgiveness is a journey and may not happen quickly. In the first pain of being wronged it may be hard to see beyond the perpetrator's wrong doing. It may be hard to see beyond our hurt and to yearn that those who have wronged us might be redeemed and changed. It may be a struggle that takes time. So sometimes the answer to the question, 'have you forgiven?', is 'I'm on that journey'. But we live in hope.

And thirdly, it can hurt to forgive. It can hurt to lay down our grievance. It can hurt to lay down our resentment. There is something in us that must die if we are to forgive and that is a very painful death. We speak about the Christian life as one that involves taking up the cross, and here

surely is one place where we encounter that cross – in the sheer pain of forgiving. It is as if there is something in us that is being ruptured and torn. As one theologian put it, “forgiveness is a voyage of anguish for the forgiver.” And part of that anguish is surely the fear that to forgive is somehow to condone evil. But it’s not about condoning evil. It’s about recognising that evil can be defeated in our redemption and restoration from our sin.

As Christians, we pray repeatedly, ‘forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors’ – what the unforgiving servant in the story Jesus told failed to do. God give us grace to be like the master in the story. God is like him. Jesus is like him. And we are called to be like him too. Amen.

Almighty and gracious God,  
 Holy and merciful one,  
 It is good to gather together in your presence here.  
 Though some of us are present still only through  
 the wonders of technology,  
 yet we rejoice that the doors of this house of God  
 are open once again,  
 and we can be physically present to one another.  
 We praise you for what we share here:  
 for the gift of your Word, and for prayer,  
 and for music and for song,  
 and for one another and the promise that where we gather  
 Jesus Christ is present.  
 O God as we gather in gratitude  
 we acknowledge our sins and failures,  
 the pain we inflict upon one another by what we do,  
 and the hurt too that we inflict by what we leave undone.  
 O God at the heart of the good news by which we live  
 is the offer and promise of forgiveness.  
 Teach us our need of it;  
 help us to grasp it gratefully,  
 and grant that we may never take it for granted  
 but that we may live more faithfully in the knowledge  
 that we are forgiven people –  
 and a forgiving people, as we learn to forgive one another.  
 And for that we seek the power and strength of  
 your Holy Spirit.  
 We pray these things in Jesus’ name and in the words he taught us we pray together, saying...