

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

Sirach 27:30-28:7

Psalm 102

Romans 14:7-9

Matthew 18:21-35

Our readings this Sunday follow on from last week, as Jesus continues his teaching about the importance of forgiveness. The instruction of fraternal correction we heard last week is now placed in the context of acknowledging just how much we have been forgiven ourselves. Some scripture scholars argue that up to two-thirds of Jesus' teaching is either directly or indirectly about forgiveness. And at the outset, I think we should acknowledge that this is not easy teaching. I dare say that most of us can think of a time when someone we really trust—perhaps a very close friend, perhaps a family member—has done something—intentionally or not—that has *really* hurt us, and the idea of forgiving them might be the furthest thing from our minds.

To start with, let's clarify a couple of things about the nature of forgiveness. Firstly, we must emphasise that forgiveness is not about being a doormat, and letting people walk all over you – that's self-loathing. We can't be coerced into forgiving, and if we don't stand up for ourselves it's not really forgiveness. But if we are able to freely let go of hurts or things people owe us, it can be an occasion of beautiful grace.

Secondly, we should point out that there is a difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. If we get into a fight with someone, but then afterwards we make up and it's all okay – that's reconciliation. It implies that each of us have forgiven each other, but the actual reconciliation involves the relationship between us – it's the act of making up.

On the other hand, if we get into a fight with someone, and afterwards we feel bad about it and want to patch things up, but they don't and they go on feeling angry, we can still forgive them – even if the relationship has not yet been healed. So reconciliation involves both people, whereas forgiveness is something that happens within each person (with God's help, of course).

So you might ask, what's the point of forgiveness in situations where we still haven't made up with the other person? Well, for one thing, it's a question of freedom – for both us and them. Firstly, by forgiving, we free ourselves from having to keep on carrying our anger about the situation. It means we let the anger go and are able to be at peace, even if the other person is still angry. Furthermore, by forgiving, we help the other person be free from the guilt they might be feeling for having hurt us. By seeing that we are no longer angry, it can help them calm down a bit, and if they secretly feel bad about having hurt us, it helps them let go of that guilt and hopefully move towards forgiving us as well.

Here's another reason why forgiveness is important. If someone hurts us and we get angry, what tends to happen is that, while we are angry, we often can hurt other people as well. Then those people get angry and pass it on to others, and on and on it goes. Unforgiven hurts have a way of multiplying and spreading far and wide.

Indeed, so much of the history of the world follows this pattern – one group or nation attacks another, then that group or nation gets angry and holds onto the pain until it is able to attack back. How many wars in our history have been a result of unforgiven hurts from the past that are dredged up to inspire present hostilities? The hurt just keeps being passed on and passed on... until someone is able to break the cycle.

Let me give one example. The one Cold War leader in Eastern Europe who managed to stay in power following the collapse of the Soviet Union was Serbian president Slobodan Milošević, who did so by inflaming old racial hatreds, which in turn led to the genocide and ethnic cleansing of the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s. One of the key moments in Milošević's consolidation of power was in the late-1980s when the remains of a fallen Serbian commander were unearthed and paraded throughout Serbia for a whole year. "They'll never do this to you again," implored Milošević. The soldier in question had died **600** years earlier. And yet the resentment still remained.

To bring it to the present, think of how much lingering resentment there is in our society about how the Covid pandemic has been handled. The lockdowns, the vaccine politics, etc. Can you imagine if another, more deadly virus began to spread in a few years? The likelihood of there being sufficient collective goodwill and trust to get through it reasonably unscathed is almost impossible to imagine.

To get back to Jesus, think of the significance of the last public words he spoke before died on the cross. This most innocent and perfect man, who had been condemned by the political and religious establishment, to say nothing of an angry mob, turned his eyes to Heaven and prayed, "Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do."

This unbelievable act of praying for and forgiving all those who had played a role in his death (which really includes all of us), definitely broke the vicious cycle of hurts and resentment. It allowed room for something truly *new* to break into the world, as it did so gloriously three days later. This is why we call it *Good News*. Without forgiveness, nothing truly new can really take place – it's just the same old hurts being passed around over and over.

- -

Another dimension of forgiveness is when someone owes us something. Let's say we lend something to someone—maybe some money, or some food, or some clothing—and they are meant to pay us back. But after a while it becomes clear to us that the other person really needs that money or food or clothing more than we do. We might have five jackets, and the one we lent them is their only one. In this situation, to forgive the debt means that we decide to just let them have it – that they don't owe it

back to us anymore. Strict justice would mean them returning it to us. But forgiveness is about something more than strict justice or fairness. It is about a largeness of heart, a kindness that realises that sometimes life isn't fair and we can do something about it.

With all this in mind, let's look briefly at the parable Jesus told after his exhortation to forgiveness in the Gospel passage we've just heard. The amounts of money that Jesus cites in this parable are deliberately ridiculous, so as to drive home his point. So the first servant who owed 10,000 talents – that's roughly the equivalent of 20 million dollars. And the second servant who owed 100 denarii – that's roughly the equivalent of \$20.

And what Jesus is saying is that we're like that first servant. What God has forgiven us—most especially through the death of his Son Jesus on the cross—is an immeasurable sum, and we are thus obliged to be forgiving in return, out of gratitude for what we have had done to us.

Obviously this is a parable, but I sometimes wonder if the first servant—the one who had such a large amount forgiven—whether he acted the way he subsequently did out of shame. I wonder if he was embarrassed about having been in such dire straits, and being dependent upon such unearned mercy, and if his disgraceful behaviour to the guy who owed him \$20 was an acting out of his shame.

In any event, the point that Jesus is clearly making to us, is that we've been the recipient of so much unearned mercy from God, and that we need to strive to forgive in return.

It's a sobering message, to be sure. If there's someone in our life—or more than one person—who we struggle to forgive – Jesus says that this has to be a priority for us.

Now of course, forgiveness is not something that we can do on our own power alone – we need the Lord's grace to help us forgive. But even if we are struggling to forgive someone, and we're not sure that we really want to forgive them, we can at least *want to want to*. We can always turn to the Lord and say to him, "Help me to want to forgive this person." This is a starting point that we can all manage. And God can take it from there.

In the Lord's Prayer we say, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." We need to recognise how much we need forgiveness ourselves, and how much God has already forgiven us – just like then servant in today's Gospel who was forgiven such a big debt. God has given us so much – our very being, all of creation, our faith, and most importantly our salvation, having wiped away the burden of our sins through the sacrifice of Christ—such that we would have no hope of ever paying it back. Compared to this, we will only even be asked to forgive a small amount.

We worship a God who is merciful and forgiving, so let us pray that, with his help, we might learn how to forgive others, so as to help bring peace and healing and something truly new break into our hurting world. Amen.