**Sermon: forgiving those who trespass against us**

**Romans 14: 1-12**

**Matthew 18: 21-35**

I’m sure that there’s a good many of you who say the Lord’s prayer on a daily basis. For much of my life, saying the Lord’s prayer has been my way of re-orientating myself each day, an opportunity to find some perspective, to set my concerns before God, and perhaps most significantly to reflect on the things I’ve needed God’s forgiveness for and the things I myself needed to forgive.

This forgiveness pairing has perhaps always been the part I’ve dwelt on the longest, but rarely in equal parts. I tend to find that by the time I’ve listed off and considered all the things I’ve made a mess of, I then seem to whizz past those who might have trespassed against me – “yeah, yeah, that’s fine…all is forgiven” – and don’t often examine enough what resentments might be left lingering deep down.

This need to forgive others, wholeheartedly and repeatedly stands at the heart of this morning’s Gospel reading. Here we find Jesus instructing the disciples on the need to forgive and then telling a parable to illustrate just why this is so important.

The passages follow on immediately from last week’s instruction on our attitudes to lost sheep and disciplinary procedures for dealing with those who will not turn back to the fold. It’s clearly no accident that forgiveness is the very next word following on from conflict and discipline. If we are not people who are constantly willing to offer forgiveness, then how can we hope to receive the forgiveness that God has made possible for us?

Peter, ever very literal in his understanding, asks Jesus how many times he should forgive a member of the church who sins against him and suggests seven times – perhaps a significant number, bringing to mind a reversal of the sevenfold vengeance set out in Genesis for those who lift a hand to Cain. Jesus’s answer reflects the generosity of God and His love for us - “…*not seven times, but seventy-seven times.*”

There has been much debate as to whether Jesus was advising seventy-seven times or seventy times seven times, i.e. 490, but such discussions are superfluous. Jesus was not giving a figure to count and stick to, but just a very large number! Our forgiveness is not to be exhaustible or easily applied, but to reflect the magnitude of the forgiveness that Jesus will achieve for all.

To reinforce this point, Jesus then tells the parable of the unforgiving servant in which an official working for the King is forgiven a catastrophic mismanagement of funds, only to then refuse mercy to his own debtor. The official’s loss of 10,000 talents reveals an impossibly high figure – around what the average worker would take 200, 000 years to earn. If we consider that the annual tax income of all of Herod the Great’s territories was a mere 900 talents, this gives us some idea of the scale of loss! The point is that the official could never possibly repay this debt and yet he is still forgiven. In contrast, even though the debt owed to him is only 1/600,000th of what he has had cancelled by the king, he cannot find it in his heart to forgive.

If we cannot be people who are willing to forgive, then we will not be able to receive God’s forgiveness. Indeed, fostering hurt, anger and resentment does nothing for any of us. It can eat away at us and turns us away from God’s gracious acts of love. When we fail to forgive, we fail to reflect Jesus’s words to Peter and His commandment to love all, even our enemies.

The cost of failing to forgive can be understood on many levels. Hurts can build up even in the most innocuous situations and if they are left to fester, then they can become something much more serious.

In my family life, I’ve always insisted that any arguments and upsets are dealt with in full, with nothing being swept under the carpet for a quiet life. Now, I know this will be very hard for any of you to believe, but this can make me a right pain in the neck, wanting everything resolved and everyone absolutely clear on the fact that I was right! (only joking!) But, I do believe that this is the right way – we do need to constantly approach each other with forgiving hearts if we are to heal ourselves and the world around us.

There are obviously many famous modern examples that illustrate the importance of forgiveness. Some of you may remember the name Timothy McVeigh, a disgruntled American soldier, who, in 1995, carried out the largest act of domestic terrorism ever perpetrated in the United States, leading to the destruction of a government building in Oklahoma and 168 deaths, including many children. He was executed in 2001 and so many family members wished to see this that they had to stream it to a nearby auditorium. I remember seeing a number of them interviewed afterwards and the most striking thing was the general sense of disappointment and upset that this event had not helped them in the least.

The search for peace through revenge or state justice or fairness based on “*an eye for an eye*” had not been realised and many confessed to an increased sense of emptiness thereafter. Since then, some have spoken out about finding forgiveness for McVeigh and, in particular, a man called Bud Welch has spoken around the world about how being able to forgive the death of his daughter has enabled him to find peace and even meet with Bill McVeigh, the father of Tim.

The need for forgiveness remains at the heart of all our lives. If we cannot do this, we alienate ourselves from God and His creation. After all, each one of us was made in the image of God, each one of us contains something of the divine spark. If we cannot be reconciled to each other, then we cannot allow God to fully reside in us.

This clearly isn’t easy. There are plenty of reasons for resentment in ordinary times and the current climate has obviously heightened this – resentment over inconsiderate people not wearing masks, standing too close to us in supermarkets, gathering in large groups, taking advantage of the generosity of others. All these things can cause the best of us to experience anger and frustration, but we forget in these moments that we are all fallen, broken, incomplete, all prone to temptations and failings.

If we are to live as followers of Jesus, we must be the ones who keep showing forgiveness in our world, not ignoring wrongdoing, but making clear our willingness to love our enemies, forgive and move forward together. This starts with us looking deep within ourselves each day, being honest with ourselves, and letting go of any anger and hate that we carry.

May we all be quick to forgive those who trespass against us and allow God’s unending forgiveness for us to change our hearts each day. Amen