

24th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME YEAR A HOMILY 2020

UNLIMITED FORGIVENESS AND FORGIVING FOR ALL!

Mt 18.21-35 Ez 27.23-28.9 Rom 14.27-29

Welcome to another virtual celebration of Eucharist as we hit nearly half-way through September, with the springtime buds, flowers and verdant growth surrounding us, with the birds singing, and the sun still rising, as nature continues its inexorable, irrepressible, cyclical course, irrespective of our current crisis, hopefully lifting slowly, as the numbers of coronavirus infections gradually go down, week by week, day by day, as 6 months of church closure approaches (apart from funerals!!).

Following up on Fathers' Day, this Sunday is both "**Land Sunday**" and "**Child Protection Sunday**", so there's always something to focus our attention, in terms of significant issues.

A most moving event was where the recent victim impact statements were publicly expressed in Christchurch, in front of the perpetrator of the horrendous massacre of 51 people at prayer, at two Islamic mosques in March last year. While many understandably expressed an inability to forgive, because of their loss, and the premeditated evil intent, evident in the mind and dark heart of the gunman, one bereaved mother spoke thus: "*I have decided to forgive you... because I don't have hate; I don't have revenge... The damage is done. Hussein (her dead son) will never be here.*" How difficult could that statement have been to make? It does reflect the possibility of letting go and moving on, despite the horror and loss, as well as the implicit lack of remorse on the part of the offender. I would find it just about impossible, were I to be in such a situation!

Yet, psychologically and emotionally, don't we know that harbouring hatred and thoughts of revenge, only weighs us down, making us more bitter and twisted, as the resulting internal darkness erodes our own equilibrium and capacity to go forward and live life well ourselves. Unresolved anger, too, is darkly destructive of ourselves, and our own well-being, more than anyone else's! Jesus offers us a way out, with the hope of understanding, forgiveness, mercy, and thus hope and peace of mind.

A person was once heard to say: "***I will never forgive them for that!***" I'll never forget the statement, as it was from someone expressing a cantankerous unwillingness to get over past disagreements, disappointments and hurts, however minor they may have been. The comment made me wonder how one could approach an attitude or celebration of the sacrament of Reconciliation, either as penitent or confessor, as it amounts rather to the antithesis of Jesus' teaching and example! It certainly fails to reflect the spirit of today's Gospel, as we move on from practical ways of resolving differences and difficulties in the Christian community to considering the need as individuals to forgive each other, including you and me, as we can sometimes be too harsh on ourselves. Certainly, forgiveness can be hard to come to, when the hurt has been deep, and moreso, where the other person fails to acknowledge the wrong perpetrated, or is unwilling to express remorse or regret or sorrow.

Jesus sets a high bar for mercy, but his focus is on divine compassion and forgiveness, which he encourages us to strive for, even if we fall short, as we do. The sentiment is at the heart too, of the Lord's Prayer, which we say so often, that we can lose the sense of what it means in reality.

It is suggested that this chapter of Matthew's Gospel is reflective of life in the early church, where structures and systems were developing, along with celebrations of worship in sacramental life. There were the issues of diversity, inclusion and no doubt personality clashes and complications in relationships, given the human factor involved. Not much has changed, has it?

The Christian perspective preached by Jesus, however, is one where exclusion, as a last resort (as we heard in last week's Gospel), because of serious transgression, should only be temporary, and another chance not just being one more, but ideally an infinite number of times, despite recalcitrance.

The parable we hear today is not just about a slave or servant (who could hardly have built up the amount of debt described by Jesus), but could just as well have been about a courtier or finance minister, with heavy responsibility to manage money responsibly. Scripture scholar Donald Senior speaks of this story having “*certain fantastic features that smack of popular storytelling*”, reminding us that 10,000 was the highest denomination in ancient accounting (*Roman historian Josephus says the entire annual revenue from the Jewish tax was only 600 talents*), the number given by Jesus as the staggering amount owed. (*One might wonder how he might have accumulated such a debt, as gambling was presumably not so rampant back then, and risky investment opportunities not so readily available, with no stock exchange nor TAB!*) But let’s remember it’s just a parable, used as a means of teaching the fundamentally important principle of Christian forgiveness, being far more demanding than the common practice of those times of revenge.

And, unlike, in some contemporary circumstances, it’s far more than fake forgiveness, pardoning our friends, or those who can do us favours if we let them ‘*off the hook*’!

The main point, of course, is that the one forgiven his debts, fails to apply the same principles on a far smaller scale to the one who owes him a much smaller amount. Therein lies the problem, where he is so unwilling to see the necessary connection between his own relief at being dispensed from his overwhelming debts, to the obvious, even common sense, requirement to transfer the same attitude down the line, to the person indebted to him! The imagery is a bit rough, with the offender grabbing the poor chap by the throat, ignoring the plea for mercy and having him imprisoned, with no practical means of paying back the debt, as a result. When you think about it, it’s more about a sadistic desire for revenge, rather than getting back the relatively small amount that was owed (*a single ‘talent’ equivalent to up to 10,000 denarii or pennies, so the comparisons are extreme!*)

We have many role models for living up to the spirit of what Jesus proclaims about forgiveness. A classic example is Nelson Mandela, remembering his 10,000 days (nearly 30 years!) of imprisonment, a considerable time in solitary confinement, and coming out with no acrimony, but rather seeking reconciliation, harmony and mutual respect. Archbishop Desmond Tutu determinedly led the post-Apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, allowing for victims to tell their stories, and offer forgiveness, however difficult that would have been, in the face of those who had committed crimes against them, physically, psychologically and emotionally.

Finally, I like to play with numbers (*like Adam Spencer the numerologist enthusiast*). Apart from the 10,000 talents and the 100 denarii, is the number 7, nominated by Peter as the number of times forgiveness should be offered, a pretty generous suggestion, given the times. Senior says: “*Seven often has a symbolic meaning in Jewish numerology and can imply infinity. Jesus’ reply explodes even that bounty: ‘Not 7 times but 77 times’ (or 70 times 7!) but, in any case, implies limitless forgiveness... For Matthew, the divine will remains the guiding ethical principle for the community... proclaimed in Jesus’ teachings and embodied in his actions... A commitment to reconciliation based ultimately on the manner of God’s own graciousness toward sinful humanity.*” Likewise, says Raymond Brown: “**Christian forgiveness, then, is to imitate the unlimited range of God’s forgiveness, as is confirmed by the eloquent parable of the unforgiving servant.**”

Tough, or even impossible, as it all may seem, the call to forgive and to acknowledge and learn from our own mistakes and transgressions is a lifetime process, reassuring in the knowledge we are always forgiven by an infinitely merciful God, as revealed in Jesus.

john hannon

13th September 2020