

The Church's prayer for this Sunday – The fourteenth Sunday after Trinity

Merciful God,
your Son came to save us
and bore our sins on the cross:
may we trust in your mercy
and know your love,
rejoicing in the righteousness that is ours
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Bible readings and reflection for Sunday 13th September 2020, the fourteenth Sunday after Trinity

Psalm 103: 8-13

- ⁸The Lord is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
⁹He will not always accuse,
nor will he keep his anger for ever.
¹⁰He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
¹¹For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him;
¹²as far as the east is from the west,
so far he removes our transgressions from us.
¹³As a father has compassion for his children,
so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.

Today's reading from the Old Testament: Genesis 50: 15-21

Joseph Forgives His Brothers

¹⁵Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, 'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?' ¹⁶So they approached Joseph, saying, 'Your father gave this instruction before he died, ¹⁷"Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.'" Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.' Joseph wept when they spoke to him. ¹⁸Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, 'We are here as your slaves.' ¹⁹But Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? ²⁰Even

though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. ²¹ So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.' In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

For the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Today's reading from the gospels: Matthew 18: 21-35

Forgiveness

²¹ Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' ²² Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

²³ 'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵ and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." ²⁹ Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." ³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

For the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

A reflection for the fourteenth Sunday after Trinity from Revd David Newton, lead minister for Comberton, Caldecote and Toft.

When I was at University, I helped out with the church youth group. One evening we took the young people punting. We dropped the punts off at the Mill Pond and began walking back towards the town centre. It was heaving with teenagers drinking and generally larking around. Most of it was good natured.

Unfortunately, one young man took a dislike to one of our young people and soon a group of aggressive older teenagers started following us up Mill Lane. As leaders, we dropped back to put ourselves between our young people and these other teenagers. Still, they followed us round onto King's Parade and a leader of the pack came up by my side and smacked me full on in the face. He knocked half my front tooth out. I'd always wondered what it felt like to get punched in the face, and (maybe, as he missed my nose) I remember thinking, 'gosh, that doesn't hurt as much as I thought it would.' Anyway, I just carried on walking, and this person's mates saw sense and dragged him away.

Afterwards the young people from church kept telling me how amazing it was that I just 'took it' and did not fight back. They thought it was courageous; I would just call it self-preservation.

That was the end of that, and life went on. Six months later I got a call from a victim support officer, to say that the young lad who had hit me had been found after a DNA match from some blood. As he was under 18, the focus was all on 'restoration' and so I was asked to attend a meeting with him, to talk through our experiences of the night. It was one of the most profound and hopeful experiences of my life. He spoke of the impact alcohol had had, his escape from its clutches, and his attempt to begin again at Long Road College. We shook hands, I wished him all the best, and off we went. I even invited him on an Alpha Course (although to no avail).

Obviously, I tell the story as it is at heart about forgiveness, even though I don't think the word was ever mentioned. This young man, *thankfully* under 18 at the time, was given the opportunity for restoration rather than punishment.

Undoubtedly, it's a silly little story – a mere triviality in comparison to the demands of forgiveness made on some. I lost a tooth, it got replaced, no big deal.

Yet I hope the story sheds light on some of the joy that forgiveness can unleash. Moments of profound hope of what might yet be. We see such joy in the little cameo of Joseph and his brothers (portrayed in the reading from Genesis). A family torn apart was restored!

Conversely, our Gospel reading reminds us – in fairly stark terms – of the pain that unforgiveness brings about. In the parable, this is put in terms of direct punishment from God. But, as is so often with themes of judgement in the bible, we don't need to adhere to tyrannical views of God to see the sense of this.

To live a life characterised by unforgiveness, by a refusal to let go of wrongs suffered, leads to dark places indeed. It leads to bitterness. It leads a person to live in the past and to forget the present moment. It leads a person to being controlled by actions done or words spoken by others. We become gripped, strangled even, by destructive forces beyond us.

To forgive is simply to be free. To refuse forgiveness is to be bound.

Yet, to choose to forgive is only possible if we have come to see ourselves as eternally forgiven people. The beginning of the parable is just as blunt and stark as its ending. We meet a man who owes 10,000 talents. I worked this out to be £4 billion in today's money! The sum is ludicrous, impossible, farcical even.

The point is *not* that we are this slave who has been forgiven so much by God compared to what we might ever have to forgive others for. That would be a silly literalism. I might, in fact, be a kind of decent guy and might have suffered grave wrongs beyond anything I would even imagine inflicting on others. Instead, the point is simply to show how ludicrous the economy of unforgiveness is.

The only thing that makes sense as those who know we have been forgiven, is to pass that forgiveness on. It's the only way to freedom.

That is not to say it is always easy. It can cost much. Again, in the pantomime of this parable, the king lost – or forwent – a huge sum of money. Forgiveness can be costly, more so than I – or indeed most of us – could possibly know.

Finally, it would be remiss of me to not also mention how forgiveness can be an oppressor's tool. To forgive does *not* mean passively accepting abuse, or violence, or injustice or oppression – whether in the domestic or political setting. We should always seek to escape and end such evils, because what Christ wants for each and every one of us is freedom, is liberation.

And that is precisely why we must also learn to forgive. For both forgiveness and the pursuit of justice are about freedom. We seek the end of abuse, the end of political tyranny, the end of racism so that all might be liberated from what binds. We forgive so that we might be liberated from what binds as well. For Christ came that we might be free.
Amen.