

Sermon Trinity 15 (24th in Ordinary) year A

Ecclesiasticus 27:33-28:9, Romans 14:7-9, Matthew 18:21-35

Generosity and grudge.

What a wonderful selection of readings we have today to help us come to the altar and commune with God with honest, generous loving and forgiving hearts. Of course there is warning too and we must be careful that our language and sensitivity filters don't edit that out. Each of the readings has lying behind it a sense of our mortality – that our days are numbered and also that our actions are noted. However we are baptised into the death of Christ not for death but that we might share in his risen life. Our second reading is often used as part of our funeral rites: God is god of the living and dead, everything we do has an effect on others for good or ill. None of us can go through life without getting things wrong sinning in thought word and deed against others. As we have been exploring in our recent sermons and reflections on the scripture all sin is against God even more than each other and all have sinned. In the language of the Gospel we all have debts.

Forgiveness and reconciliation or the opposite: hateful grudges and division lie behind not just broken individual relationships but within groups and between communities, races, tribes and nations. Our readings are not just about individual well being though that is included. We don't need much of an imagination to know how enmity and division has made the suffering of those poor people in Libya so much worse this last week or so. And we all know and have experienced how long born resentment and grudges in families and relationships eats away.

How we name things and the use of language is telling in our society. Too often we try to make things a bit more cosy and digestible but lose the gravity and even common sense. The General Medical Council might try to remove the word mother from its maternity documents but the Church often tries to repackage the Gospel and remove where possible too much emphasis on sin. I note that today you can worship online with the Church of England and hear about the parable of the forgiving King. For most of us it's not the parable of the forgiving King but the unforgiving servant and what happens to the wicked man.

Yes the readings are to evoke in us forgiveness and generosity for these two things are at the heart of God. The parable of the unforgiving servant is put before us by our Lord so that we might learn from it. He wants us to live not die

– but the choice is always there. “this is how your heavenly father will deal with you, if you, any of you fail to forgive your brother and sister from your heart.” Well that's fair warning is it not?

Of course the warning can be heeded and the task of obedience made easier if we reflect upon our lives first and really and truly imagine the forgiveness and generosity of God that flows towards us. The two ways of mercy set out in the Gospel that set us free and help us to live are firstly; forgive and you will be forgiven and secondly give and you will be given.

So we may bless the Lord for his kindness and mercy. He pardons iniquities, heals ills, and redeems lives. His compassion is vast, putting transgressions far away from those who fear him. Jesus exaggerates how often we should forgive because the love of God cannot be exaggerated. This is why Jesus teaches about forgiveness using a parable of a servant forgiven a huge debt but who then refuses to forgive a smaller debt. The master, angry at this hypocrisy, punishes him. Jesus warns that we must forgive others wholeheartedly. Elsewhere Jesus says those who are forgiven much will love much.

Once again this teaching is drawn out by Peter – so keen to learn yet slow to grasp – until his very denial of Jesus in his darkest hour is forgiven with a glance and received with tears.

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant draws a sharp contrast between the master's mercy and the servant's lack of it. And we are the servants not the masters. The metaphor of debt should resonate in all our lives and show the significance of being merciful to others. This happens best when we contemplate the divine mercy shown in Jesus on the cross. Last thursday was holy cross day and we would do well to spend a little time every day making the sign of the cross gazing upon it and and saying thank you.

Of course there is mutuality in forgiveness. The parable's principle of “forgive as you wish to be forgiven” highlights the link between our readiness to forgive and God's forgiveness towards us. It doesn't necessarily put everything right with another person here in but it does help put us right with God. We cannot control how another person will receive or accept our forgiveness. Neither does it mean being soft in the face of evil and wickedness. Jesus intervenes to save others, not himself. He always does so out of love. For us some things need to be left to God.

Hence the tension between the master's compassion and eventual judgment underscores that whilst our compassion towards others directly influences the

mercy we receive from God it doesn't give us control over others but it does stop them controlling us. We have to leave some things to God.

Jesus stresses that heartfelt forgiveness goes beyond mere words and actions. In common with the last two weeks it involves a change of heart a true internal transformation. Forgiveness and letting go require substantial effort. Forgiving injuries and bearing wrongs patiently resonate with this Gospel it is not an easy journey but it does in the end lead to spiritual growth and peace. For God is generous in his love and never grudging to those who try to follow the way of Jesus, the way of the cross.

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