

A Sermon / Reflection for the 14th Sunday After Trinity 13/9/20

Today's Gospel account is quite straightforward: it is about **forgiveness**. And if we bear in mind the relevant section of the Lord's Prayer), in interpreting today's Gospels, we won't go far wrong. The relevant part of the Lord's Prayer from Matthew chapter 6 states, "**forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors**".

So today, we continue with the second half of the teaching point, the Matthean Discourse, on the Church, and on Unity. Last week, Matthew arranged Jesus' sayings so that we had a discussion on holding a fractious church together. We heard that Jesus, the realist, had practical things to say about resolving disputes, making amends, and drawing in others to help resolve things when it cannot be sorted out easily between the two parties themselves. Whilst practical, it sounds like a legal procedure.

Today we turn to the second half of the discussion. We see that whilst Matthew puts an enormous emphasis on unity (which is important, of course!), Jesus believes that there is something even more important than that. More important than finding out who has done wrong and how to sort it out, is Jesus' wish for the community to be kind to one another. To forgive one another. Therein lies the real answer. Not in tribunals and investigations, but in reconciliation and forgiveness. Perhaps that's a lesson that some of the people from Northern Ireland or from South Africa could teach us all about.

Peter wants to know all about *Process*, and the limits of this 'forgiveness'. There was a teaching in Old Testament times that people ought to be forgiven four times. Is this still the case? Once again, Peter serves as the foil for Jesus to come out and say something important and profound on the subject. Jesus' reply, whether it is translated as 77 times or 70 x 7 times (i.e. 490 times), is an enormous number. Imagine forgiving someone nearly 500 times for the same thing! Matthew uses hyperbole, exaggeration to emphasise that there is *no limit to forgiveness*. And with that in mind, just as last time, we move into the parable to discuss things further.

There's a Steward, someone appointed to look after things on a king's behalf. (Just as we are stewards of the earth and its environmental resources, which we hold in trust). He owes the king a ridiculously large amount of money. A talent, by the way, is about 15 years' salary for a normal working person. So the Steward, who doesn't argue about the validity of the amount, somehow owes the king 10,000 talents. Now 'a talent' was a measure which has meant different things at different

times. A single talent of silver could have meant about 34 kg of it. So it may be that we are talking about 340 metric tonnes of silver. That's about the weight of 225 large cars. We're talking a stupendous amount of money to be let off. In contrast, 100 denarii was a few week's wages. This was the amount that other slaves owed the steward. So we have a huge disparity – the steward was let off perhaps billions of pounds of personal debt, which he could never have paid off, yet he acted unforgivingly to those who owed him just a few weeks' worth of money, which they might have been able to return to him, given time.

So the words of the Lord's Prayer come back to us, which can be paraphrased to, "Forgive us our debts, in the same way as we forgive those who owe us". This is the measure by which we will be judged – we will be forgiven by the same yardstick as we forgive others. Like the Steward in the story, Paul makes it clear that we can never repay God for the debt we owe Him. But we can make an attempt indirectly – we can repay his Heirs – which are all the other people on the planet that we meet. We have a debt to love all the other people on the planet. This is what we owe them. We can repay kindness with kindness. Forgiveness leads to forgiveness.

There is a lot of 'courtroom' language in the New Testament. About guilt, sentences, judgement, punishment, etc. & etc. But today Jesus tells us that we need to travel further than that. Last week Matthew taught us about process, about discerning right and wrong, correcting things. This week, Jesus tells us that that is only half the story. We need to move from matters of the head to matters of the heart. We need to move on from harsh things like 'guilt' and 'sentence' to actually making things better, and ensuring that they don't happen again. In short, we need to treat one another better, with love and forgiveness. Repaying Christ's love and sacrifice, with love and sacrifice for others. It is by doing this that we know that healing has occurred and that the lessons learned have been internalised, made a part of us.

So we are called to forgive one another. And just before we end, just like the steward in the story, who was entrusted with so much, and owed so much to the King, we are entrusted to be stewards of this planet too – the most precious thing in the entire Solar System – and today's account therefore requires us to be better stewards of that too, and make amends for those things which we have done wrong.

Amen