

Sermon at St John the Evangelist, 17th September 2017

In the name of God, who is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Amen

Words from Psalm 103: *'As far as the east is from the west, so far has He set our sins from us.'*

Are brothers & sisters willing to forgive? It is a question on which a great deal hangs. And one could argue upon which – even in impossible situations – the authenticity of the Gospel is made or unmade. And the Bible has a lot to say about it... its challenges, the times when brothers & sisters do forgive, when they fail, and (ultimately) about Jesus' life & teaching, God's final word on forgiveness. Are brothers & sisters willing to forgive?

In our 1st reading from Genesis, we are immersed in the closing chapters of an epic story of fraternal jealousy & scheming, which one would expect, by today's standards, to end in unresolved tragedy and un-forgiveness. It's the story of Jacob, who wrestled with his brother Esau, and his 12 sons, 11 of whom (you will remember & it makes for gripping reading), sell their younger brother Joseph into slavery in Egypt.

It's a great saga, one of the founding stories of the Old Testament, to which each of the 3 Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity & Islam, look for their origins. And yet here, in today's reading, the unexpected happens.

Joseph, once a slave, has worked his way up, and made good, and he's now master of Pharaoh's household in Egypt. And his brothers come to Pharaoh, in desperation, seeking food in time of famine. They meet Joseph and yet don't realise that it is Joseph, until he reveals himself to them. And here Joseph, at the climax of the story, confronted by his scarcely repentant brothers, forgives all their ill deeds, and so subverts the cycle of rivalry, violence & guilt, which had determined their actions thus far.

In the story, we see God, through the faith of Joseph, opening up a new future – a reconciled life for Jacob's family, our ancestors in the faith. Through Joseph, God brings good out of evil, reconciliation out of division, trust out of fear, and generosity out of hardness of heart.

You know what I find the most powerful in that passage? When Joseph weeps... You can almost feel the emotional intensity & depth feeling, which prompts Joseph, against all odds, to forgive. And for those of us with brothers (I've got 2!) or sisters, we know only too well how difficult the tensions in our relationships can at times be. Yet Joseph forgives. Are brothers & sisters willing to forgive?

For we believe in a God (as the Psalms tells us) who is 'full of compassion & mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness...' and One who proclaims, 'how good and lovely it is when brothers & sisters live together in unity'.

But what about Our Gospel, what perspective on forgiveness do we find there? 'Lord' Peter asks Jesus, 'if another member of the church sins against me how often should I forgive: as many as 7 times?' To which Jesus replies, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, 77 times.' In other words, forgiveness must be unconditional.

And yet, the story doesn't end here - & it's not ultimately a soft-edged message, without bite, for the Gospel contains a radical challenge too. For we know what can happen when we are unable to open our own heart to forgiveness, and allow God's mercy – even in impossible situations – to flow through us. We know how difficult forgiveness is, how long

it can take, and how much we can be paralysed by fear or anger, when we are unable to forgive – or indeed receive forgiveness.

As always, Jesus illustrates his teaching with a parable. And in the parable, he contrasts a king's forgiveness of an indebted official (who owes, we are told, 10,000 talents – a vast sum, probably equivalent to £1 billion in today's money), with the official, in turn, failing to remit his fellow slave of a minutely small debt.

If one could translate the story and its maths into today's world, it would be like a nation or group of nations (the EU perhaps) remitting the entire debt of an impoverished nation (Greece, perhaps), and the leader of that nation then refusing to remit the miniscule debt of one its poorest citizens, in return. It's a dramatic scenario. But the outcome of the story and the warning from Jesus is hard-edged, as the official is cast out & his gift of forgiveness is taken away.

It's as if we find here meaning of the Lord's Prayer – 'Forgive us our debts, as we forgive those who indebted to us' (in one translation) – turned on its head, as God says, 'Fail to forgive others, and you may jeopardise the experience of forgiveness in your own heart.' And without forgiveness, however challenging, life can be bleak... as we risk finding ourselves inhabiting that shadowy place of unresolved relationships & actions, imprisoned by fear & governed (not by faith or love) but by our lesser desires, for revenge or control, of all that makes for un-freedom.

So Jesus teaches a forgiveness which is open-hearted and knows no limits. It need **not** be a forgiveness which ignores wrongdoing or fails to seek restitution after an offence; indeed justice and the rule of law, not least for victims of violence, is essential - and its neglect, as we have discovered, is a grave sin. But whatever stages we need to go through, forgiveness should be fundamental to our way of life as Christians. And without sharing forgiveness with others, we undermine the very gift that God yearns to bestow on each one of us.

Forgiveness of self and others may, at times, be agonisingly difficult –but forgiveness, ultimately, is what allows us to be free. And every time we offer an act of free, forgiving love (even when, like Joseph, it goes against the grain) we become more fully alive, in Christ.

Forgiveness, Jesus tells us, is at the heart of the astounding good news of God's love. Forgiveness, God's unconditional reconciling love towards us, and the invitation to forgive others – whether family or friends, other Christians, or fellow human beings from whom we are estranged – is where the challenge really is.

It may take time, it may be acutely difficult, it may cost us everything & require immense courage, but in the end it's the one true route to freedom in this world & in the next. Without forgiveness our common life, let alone our political life, would be bleak. Forgiveness matters, forgiveness is real, and it's God's gift to us. And if we embrace it, like Joseph, then we share in bringing to birth a new world – God's commonwealth of love, one new humanity in place of the two.

I am going to end with the words of an amazing religious sister, Teresa Forcades, of Montserrat in Spain; a theologian and activist, whom I met at Greenbelt, who writes about her passionate belief in the importance of forgiveness: 'I believe, above all, in forgiveness' she writes, 'I believe that our capacity for forgiveness reveals the bear truth of our capacity to love, and I am often surprised to encounter this capacity in people I don't particularly admire,

and to find it lacking in others I love dearly. More than once I have been surprised by my own difficulties in forgiving, and I have experienced the miracle of being forgiven. It is like being born again; being born from love...

I believe that forgiveness is the greatest act of freedom. This means that everything can be forgiven, but nobody can be compelled to forgive. Forgiveness cannot be forced and its outcome cannot be predicted. God alone can judge the authenticity of an act of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is the most rational of all acts, because it recognises that something more than automatism rules the world. Forgiveness is the act that allows us to be creators, like God; the act that allows us to start over once again; seventy times seven.' *In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit Amen*