

Mathematics of Forgiveness?

Sermon from Bishop Jo for Sunday 13th September 2020

Matthew 18:21-35

Then Peter came and said to Jesus, ‘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.

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

“How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” asks Peter, raising himself up and stretching himself out to be magnanimous, far beyond his natural human capacity. Because this far exceeded what the rabbis taught about forgiving someone three times (after which you could do with them what you liked). He’d DOUBLED it and added one more time for good measure.

Jesus answered Peter, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

At this point I picture Peter trying to do some quick sums in his head, getting out his mental calculator so to speak. And Jesus smiling, given his whole point is that forgiveness cannot be a quantifiable event. It’s a quality; a way of living, a way of being. It asks everything and exceeds everything. It’s the impossibility, that Jesus makes possible.

I wonder if you’ve ever felt you stood in that impossible place: at the intersection bearing some tremendous hurt yet also aware of Jesus’ call to forgive. It can feel like a double whammy, can’t it? Not only broken by wounds from another’s action but also tortured by the expectation you just can’t manage.

As CS Lewis puts it, ‘everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until there is something to forgive’. (*Mere Christianity*, p.115). Forgiveness is the virtue we most enjoy yet least employ.

What do we do when there is something to forgive?

We may strike back, seeking revenge. We may get paralysed by the darkness and get depressed. We might run away and find tremendous energy for something wholly other. We may build barriers of resentment and resistance. I speak from experience. I myself have been in that place where forgiveness felt preposterous: utterly impossible. An occasion comes to mind when I found myself quite unable to complete the Lord's Prayer as I stumbled across that line as if for the first time ever, 'Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us'. It was devastating. Quite apart from the fact that I wasn't in a position to continue leading worship as I quietly dissolved into a puddle of tears.

Today's parable describes vividly how God's forgiveness and human forgiveness are integrally related. The king forgives his slave an extraordinary amount. Ten thousand talents is about 3000 years of work at the ordinary daily wage. It seems there is no debt too large to be forgiven. This man, this debtor, was forgiven. That's what the kingdom of heaven is like. That's how our God is. This slave, however, refused to forgive his fellow slave 100 denarii, about three months of work at the ordinary daily wage. Too often that's what our world is like. Frequently, it's how we are. And in that refusal, the forgiven slave lost his own forgiveness.

For me it was uttering a line of the Lord's Prayer that I'd trotted out most days of my life as if it were brand new that delivered the realisation that freedom from my bad is tied to the evil of another. No matter how unbalanced the equation, both parties are left bereft of the future God wants to give. There's the parable in a nutshell. I recall someone who worked in reconciliation following the Rwandan genocide telling how she used to illustrate this in her workshops. She asked for two volunteers to be tied up at opposite ends of a length of rope, which was looped around a tree. Until there was forgiveness between them, both parties were constantly constrained by the others movements. Neither party was free.

The demand for forgiveness includes the racist, the rapist, the bully. It includes the cheating spouse, the lying journalist, the abusive parent. It extends to the corrupt regime, the greedy corporation, a tribal genocide. Nothing and no one is exempt from forgiveness if I am not to be exempt.

Forgiveness is the only way forward. That doesn't mean we forget, condone, or approve of what was done. It doesn't mean we ignore or excuse cruelty or injustice. It means we're released from them. We let go of the longings for destruction or the fantasies of revenge. We halt the acid of resentment that otherwise seeps into everything. We look to the future rather than the past. We try to see and love as God sees and loves. We pray for the other's wellbeing, entrusting their judgement to the One who is the ultimate judge. And we name our own sinfulness and failure as well as our pain.

Forgiveness is the way in which we align our life with God's life. We have to desist continually from putting ourselves in the place of God, as if we know better about justice than the One to whom everyone is accountable (Ro. 14:10, 12). I think regular prayer - including regular confession of our own sin - is the best cure for that. And in my experience, when we pray for those who've hurt us, we're enabled to grow in our capacity for forgiveness, to be stretched like Peter into the possibility of ever greater magnanimity. I've found it helpful to read the accounts of others seeking to forgive, or be forgiven. Nelson Mandela. Desmond Tutu. John Newton. Festo Kivengere. Just to name a few. They help to put my story, my little corner of this broken world, in wider perspective.

There is nothing like forgiveness. It's intoxicating in the freedom it brings - and not just when we receive it but when we find a way to give it. We need to forgive as much, maybe more, for ourselves as for the one we forgive. Forgiving those who trespass against us is the salve that begins to heal our wounds. It may not change the one who hurt me but I

know it changes me. It brings deeper life, greater grace, richer peace - and strangely, greater capacity for further forgiveness.

Forgiveness creates the space for new life. It looses us from the weight of chains. It disentangles us from the evil of another. It's the refusal to let our future be determined by the past. It's the letting go of the thoughts, the hatred, the fear that fill us so that we might live and love again. It's the healing of our soul and life. Forgiveness takes us out of darkness into light, from death to life - it's the determined choice of resurrection for the one who forgives.

But how do we begin to forgive? It's no easy road. Don't let anyone tell you, "Just give it up to God. Forgive and forget." Simplistic answers only demean those who suffer and pick at the wound. Forgiving another takes time and work. It's something we must practice every day. It begins with recognition and thanksgiving that we have been forgiven. We are the beneficiaries of the crucified one who, hanging between two thieves, prayed, "Father, forgive them" (Lk. 23:34). That is the cry of infinite forgiveness, a cry we are to echo in our own lives, in our families, our work places, our parishes, our day to day life.

Forgiveness doesn't originate in us. It begins with God. That's what the slave who refused to forgive didn't understand. It was not about him. It's about God. We do not *choose* to forgive. We only choose to *share* the forgiveness we have already received. Then we chose again, and then again, and yet again. For most of us forgiveness is a process that we live into. Even though sometimes, we just can't. The pain is too much, the wound too raw, the memories too real. On those days we choose to *want* to forgive. Somedays we chose to want to want to forgive. Then there are those days that all we can do is choose to want to want to want to forgive. But we choose because that's the choice Christ made.

How many times must we choose to forgive? Tell me this. How many times have you been hurt and suffered by the actions or words of another? How many times has anger or fear controlled you? How many times has the thought of revenge filled you? How many times have you shuddered at the sight, the name, or the memory of another? How many times have you replayed in your head the argument with another? That's how many times you choose. "Not seven times, I tell you, but seventy-seven times".