

Twenty Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

I feel very sad when I hear people say that they will never forgive someone who has hurt them. I feel very sad when I read about people who have suffered some crime committed against themselves or their loved ones saying that the hope that the perpetrator of that crime rot in hell. I am slow to judge them because I cannot know the pain that they are experiencing. But I often find myself praying for people who cannot forgive others. And I pray for myself too that I may have the grace of forgiving anyone who hurts me.

Today we are forced to think about how we respond to those who hurt us. Peter asks Jesus how often he should forgive someone who has hurt him. He very generously offers an answer to his own question: “As much as seven times?” But the answer that Jesus gives: “Not seven, but seventy times seven” makes it clear that forgiveness cannot be limited. If we are to be part of God’s kingdom, we are obliged to forgive without condition.

While Peter and the others are trying to draw breath enough to protest, Jesus tells a parable that very powerfully makes the point of why we should be forgiving others. I think it is helpful to listen to what Jesus says as a parable and not to equate the king in

the story with God from the beginning. Jesus would have wanted us to recognise the king as a gentile king and so to be doubly surprised by his ability to move from the realm of justice to mercy. The servant, perhaps his treasurer, pleads with the king to give him time to pay back his debt, but the debt was so astronomically large that he could not possibly pay back what he owed the king in a lifetime. The king felt sorry for him and cancelled the debt. He acts with mercy. But when the servant meets another servant who owes him an amount that could be easily paid back, he reverts back to the realm of justice and has him thrown into prison. It is because he chose to move back into the realm of justice that the king then has to act towards him in the same way. The servant made the choice to reject mercy, and so the king has to act and hand him over to the torturers until his debt was paid.

In case we had not made the point ourselves from this parable, Jesus or Matthew tells us that our heavenly father will be forced to act like that towards us unless we have each forgiven our brother or sister from the heart. We have been immersed in forgiveness by a merciful God. We cannot earn forgiveness from God, and we do not have to. Forgiveness is a free gift to us.

But we can lose the gift of being forgiven if we reject it.

I was reading something of what Pope Francis said to the people of Columbia during his pastoral visit there a week or so ago. Among the things that moved me was what he said at a Reconciliation Liturgy. Some of people who had suffered from the violence of the civil war witnessed to how Jesus had moved them to forgive those who had wronged them. Some of those who caused the violence also spoke. The Pope responded to each of them. He prefaced his remarks by saying, “We have gathered at the feet of the Crucifix of Bojayá, which witnessed and endured the massacre of more than a hundred people, who had come to the Church for refuge on 2 May 2002.” The bomb that was thrown into the church by the FARC rebels and killed those people also tore off the arms and the legs of the figure of the crucified Christ. “This image has a powerful symbolic and spiritual value. As we look at it, we remember not only what happened on that day, but also the immense suffering, the many deaths and broken lives, and all the blood spilt in Colombia these past decades. To see Christ this way, mutilated and wounded, questions us. He no longer has arms, nor is his body there, but his face remains, with which he looks upon us and loves us. Christ broken and without

limbs is for us “even more Christ”, because he shows us once more that he came to suffer for his people and with his people. He came to show us that hatred does not have the last word, that love is stronger than death and violence. He teaches us to transform pain into a source of life and resurrection, so that, with him, we may learn the power of forgiveness, the grandeur of love.”

Most of the people to whom Pope Francis was speaking had grown up knowing nothing but civil war during their life time. But there was a deep desire in them now for peace and forgiveness. Our experience is so much different from the people of Columbia but even so we know that forgiveness is not easy to give or even to receive. Most of us struggle throughout our lives in handling the hurtful things that we have experienced. To forgive is a grace from God that we may have to ask for again and again until we are confident that we can stretch out our hand to the one needing forgiveness. How easy it is within families to let something hurtful that has happened in the past to hold us bound. We sometimes choose to avoid a member of the family because of something that they did to us or to someone close to us. We sometimes set out on a path that takes us where we do not really want to go, but we do not know how we can turn back

without losing face. We can also sometimes be in the position where we have hurt others and think that we cannot be forgiven long after the ones we have hurt have forgiven us and moved on.

Jesus calls us to forgive from the heart. He wants us to forgive from that place deep within us where God dwells, the place where God heals us and renews us in the image of himself.