

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 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. 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 the king’s 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 each forgive 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 need to earn it. Forgiveness is a free gift to us. But we can lose the gift of being forgiven if we reject it.

Our reading today from St. Paul’s letter to the Romans is one that we sometimes hear at a funeral. When we hear Paul say “The life and death of each of us has its influence on others” we think of some of the ways that the person we are mourning influenced us. We can thank God for the good things that we have learned about living well from the one who has died. And perhaps we

might be thinking of how they taught us how to forgive. Paul reminds us in that reading that the one who has influenced us best is Jesus himself. Paul tells us that alive or dead we belong to the Lord. His own dying and rising again made him Lord both of the dead and of the living.

We learn from Jesus himself how to be forgiving people. He suffered so much hurt and rejection during his life, but he continued to reach out to those who rejected him. As he faced the cruel death of crucifixion he prayed, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

The example of Jesus’ forgiveness may be too far from our experience. 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.