

## 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

**Matthew 18:21-35**

***How many times?***

Peter asks one of those questions that was probably in everyone's mind, but they're all afraid to ask in case they look dumb. "How many times should I forgive?" And he suggests, "As many as seven times?" It's a very generous suggestion, because Jewish tradition permitted up to three times. Peter is willing to go the extra kilometre, but then Jesus takes the question into a totally different realm – so different that when, in our time, we see it exercised like this, it's reported in the press. Just last week, in the Wellington High Court, a woman expressed forgiveness to the man who shot and critically injured her son. She wasn't denying the consequences for her son or his family. As she said in her statement, 'our lives have been changed forever' and 'my son cannot work.' The judge said of her statement, it's 'pretty amazing.'

Peter's question was about limits. How generous should I be? But Jesus says, "Not seven times, but ... seventy-seven times." That's his way of saying, beyond calculation. Jesus removes the arithmetic and talks about unlimited forgiveness. Why? Because this is what God is like. God is a serial forgiver, and that's how we are to forgive.

Jesus tells an outlandish story about a servant who owed the king 10,000 talents. It's an amount of gigantic proportions, yet the king forgave him the debt. Now, this servant was owed just 100 denarii, but when it came for him to forgive his fellow servant this paltry amount, no mercy was offered. The debt the servant owed to the king was something like \$50,000,000. The debt that was owed to him was a mere \$100. This utterly ridiculous contrast demonstrates the extent of God's mercy towards us. There's no calculation in God's forgiveness.

Such unlimited forgiveness is what we need to work for. We renounce the all-too human desire to get even. Instead, we keep forgiving those who hurt us. We take this path because, having been created in the image and likeness of God, we seek to mirror God's dealings with us. We know, only too well, how hard this can be. If you're like me, and I suspect you are, we need to pray for the strength not to get even with those who hurt us. We need large doses of grace to reflect just a little of God's merciful dealings with us. The last verse of the reading reminds us: 'So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.' It's like the phrase in the Lord's Prayer that says, 'Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.' This doesn't mean God works with us in a tit for tat fashion. We don't earn God's forgiveness by forgiving someone who has injured us. Rather, as we grow in following Jesus, we constantly ask for the help to reflect in our lives God's dealings with us.

This presents me with a challenge. I'm very happy to accept God's forgiveness of me. But how willing am I to offer it to others? There are times when I want to behave like the unforgiving servant – pleased with the idea of a forgiving God, but not if it requires me to change the way I relate to people.

Forgiveness often involves struggle. Sister Helen, in her book *Dead Man Walking* tells the story of Lloyd LeBlanc, whose son was murdered. When Lloyd arrived to identify his son, he knelt by the boy's body and prayed the Lord's Prayer. When he came to the words, 'forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us,' he realised the depth of the commitment he was making. 'Whoever did this, I must forgive them,' he later told Sister Helen. Though it's was difficult for him not to be overcome by bitterness and feelings of revenge, he prayed that line each day, for the rest of his life. Forgiveness, he found, was something that he had to pray for, struggle for, and win.

Forgiveness can be costly. To embark on the work of forgiveness may well mean continuing to feel the pain for some time – requiring us to work through the complexity of our emotions. But we undertake this work in the knowledge that we live in God’s company – God who proclaims that compassionate mercy and loving forgiveness are at the heart of what really matters, and that we are a forgiven people.

Scripture speaks of un-forgiveness being like a debt. When someone is in debt to us, we have power over them. ‘They hurt me, so they owe me to make it right.’ We can become driven by the need to see the debt paid. We collect it in different ways. We can take it out on the person, which we see as evening the score. We can bad mouth them and convince others of how much they owe us. There’s nothing wrong in wanting things to be resolved. The problem is that things only get resolved through forgiveness. The wrong can never be undone. It can only be forgiven and thereby rendered powerless. To forgive means to write off the debt and tear up the account, which is what God does for us. As Paul put it, ‘God wiped out all the charges that were against us... [God] took them away and nailed them to the cross.’ Forgiveness is an act of giving. We cancel the debt, and say, ‘I no longer hold this against you.’

Forgiveness involves a choice. We can either hold onto our right to get what’s owed to us, or we can relinquish that right and step out into the realm of grace and begin to forgive as God has forgiven us. It’s also worth remembering that forgiveness adds to our well-being. Un-forgiveness is self-destructive. By keeping our bitterness, hatred, and resentment, the person we damage most is ourselves. It cuts us off from others and becomes an all-consuming passion. Forgiveness allows us to move through the pain, resentment, and anger to a place of healing and new life.

Forgiving doesn’t mean forgetting. The memory may stay with us a long time. What changes is how we relate to it. As life goes on, and we remember something that was hurtful, we remind ourselves that with God’s grace we have forgiven the one that hurt us. Gradually the vividness of the hurt dulls and the memory fades. We must never let the person who hurt us own us. Forgiveness finally changes us from prisoners of our past to being at peace with our memories. However, forgiveness doesn’t mean that we have to remain in abusive or destructive situations. Nor does it mean that we trust someone who has shown themselves to be un-trustworthy. But it does mean that we face our animosity and make the choice to cancel the debt. That’s the choice exercised by the mother who faced the man who nearly killed her son.

God of infinite mercy,  
grant that we who know your compassion  
may rejoice in your forgiveness  
and gladly forgive others  
for the sake of Jesus Christ our Saviour.

*Alister Hendery  
Hastings – 17.9.2023*