

Sunday 11 September 2020
A Sermon by the Rev James W. Aitchison
Based on a Reading from the Lectionary

Opening Prayer

Lord God, you are our creator and our saviour,
in love you made us and by love you have redeemed us.
May your love for us bear fruit in our forgiveness of others,
that in this life we may know your gracious compassion
and in the world to come receive the everlasting joy of the fellowship
that you share with your Son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

A Reading from Holy Scripture:

Matthew 18:21-35 - The parable of the unmerciful servant.

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?'

²² Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.'

²³ 'Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. ²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.'

²⁶ 'At this the servant fell on his knees before him. "Be patient with me," he begged, "and I will pay back everything." ²⁷ The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go.'

²⁸ 'But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. "Pay back what you owe me!" he demanded.

²⁹ 'His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, "Be patient with me, and I will pay it back."

³⁰ 'But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

³² 'Then the master called the servant in. "You wicked servant," he said, "I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to."³³ Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" ³⁴ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

³⁵ 'This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

New International Version - UK (NIVUK)

Sermon

Today's reading from Matthew's Gospel is about forgiveness.

Peter asks Jesus a question,

'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Peter then goes on to answer his own question, presumably thinking that Jesus would commend him for his magnanimity, after all to forgive someone once can be hard enough, but to forgive someone seven times, well surely that is way beyond what is expected, even of a follower of Jesus.

Peter would have been familiar with the Book of the Prophet Amos, which contains a series of condemnations on various nations for three or four transgressions in particular. (See Amos 1:3 following)

In verse 6 of Ch. 1 we read,

'This is what the Lord says: "For three sins of Gaza, even for four, I will not relent. Because she took captive whole communities and sold them to Edom,"'

Now it might seem from this verse that God was not going to forgive the transgressions of those nations that surrounded Israel, but some of the Rabbis understood this verse to mean that God would forgive them up to four times. Many Rabbis concluded from this verse that no one should think of himself or herself more gracious than God and therefore they should not presume to forgive more often than God and limited the occasions of forgiveness to three.

Peter having spent time with Jesus had seen that such a limitation on how often a person must forgive was far too restrictive, so he suggests, what he thinks is a much higher, virtuous and sufficient limit on forgiving.

Jesus' reply must have surprised Peter,

'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.' If we were to understand this as strict arithmetical calculation this would be 490 times, but this is a random number and is really meant to convey the meaning, 'no limits.'

Jesus goes on to tell the story of an unmerciful servant who owed his master an enormous debt and who after pleading with his master to be patient with him, finds that his master forgives his delay in repaying and releases him from the debt; he doesn't have to pay back a penny of it his debt is fully cancelled.

When the unmerciful servant leaves his master he came upon a fellow servant who owed him a small amount of money, whereupon the unmerciful servant grabs his fellow servant by the neck and demands payment: his fellow servant begs for time to pay but his pleading falls on deaf ears and a hard heart and eh unmerciful servant has his fellow servant thrown into debtors jail.

When the other servants saw what had happened they told the master who called for the unmerciful servant and said to him,

“You wicked servant, I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?”

The master was angry and had the unmerciful servant put into the hands of the jailers. (In those days this would have been far from a pleasant experience).

Jesus is using this story to illustrate an important point. You see the debt that the unmerciful servant owed the master was ten thousand Talents. It is difficult to get an exact modern equivalent to the Talent, but many scholars reckon that it was worth more than fifteen years wages for a labourer, which means that the unmerciful servant owed his master an astronomical debt, which would have taken him about a 150,000 years to pay back from his wages.

Yet the same servant, who had been released from such a great debt, was owed a hundred Denarii by a fellow servant; a Denarius was about a day's wages for a labourer, so this servant could have paid his debt in a few years.

Clearly, Jesus is using the extreme contrast in the amounts owed, to illustrate the amazing and incomprehensible forgiveness of God.

It was sin that caused the Fall and corrupted the human race, it is sin that brought death to humanity, both physical and spiritual death. Sin has distanced us from God and indeed from one another. It is for both the collective sin as a race, and the individual sin of each person that the ultimate price was paid, that the perfect sacrifice was offered.

We all owe God such an enormous debt, a debt so vast that is beyond our ability (and even our imagination) to repay it. We had to be released from this debt by the Master Himself; only He has the right to release us. However, it has long been understood by the Christian Church that this debt to Justice and Holiness had to be paid by someone, and that someone was the Holy Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, He paid that debt with His life.

You may remember a song that goes like this:

God paid a debt He did not owe,
I owed a debt I could not pay,
I needed someone to take my sin away.
And now I sing a brand new song,
Amazing grace the whole day long,
For Jesus paid the debt that I could never pay.

The story shows us that because God has been merciful to us that we must show mercy to others. If we can be forgiven and released from such a vast debt, surely we are not only obligated, but also inspired to forgive others their debt to us, for no debt can be greater than that which we all owe to God.

Christians often speak of forgiveness, it is preached about studied and prayed for, yet it remains one of the most difficult things for anyone to practice.

The word Forgiveness has in its background the meaning, 'to give up completely the desire, or even the right to punish.' And although the concept of forgiveness is not strange to Christians, the ability or even the desire to forgive is sometimes very far from us.

How sad it is, indeed wrong, when a Christian says, 'I will never forgive the wrong so and so has done me', It may be sad and it may be wrong but we all know that it is so very human, for we know how easy it is to say the words, 'I forgive you', but quite another to actually forgive.

Jesus not only expects His followers to forgive those who have wronged them, He commands it! We cannot pray the Lord's Prayer with honesty unless we are, at the very least, unless we ask God to help us to be willing to forgive.

Jesus never told us that forgiving, would be easy, after all it cost him so much to forgive us, but He did tell us that we must learn to forgive, and if we are to expect forgiveness from God for our sin and forgiveness from others whom we have wronged, then we must forgive those who wrong us.

Now, how do we do this? Is it about trying to muster up 'nice' feelings toward that person who has injured us? No! Feelings are transient, and when our guard is down feelings of anger, dislike and even revenge, will rush in and push out any, 'nice feelings' that we may have conjured up toward that person.

Is it about trying to forget what he has done to hurt me? No! You have heard the phrase, 'let's forgive and forget', well yes, this is the ideal, but who can forget? (Unless we were to lose our memory).

We can of course make a conscious decision not to dwell on a particular memory, but it will be there in the recess of our mind and unless there has been genuine forgiveness, then that memory will continue to cause us pain whenever it surfaces (or possibly even as it remains unnamed in the background of our mind).

Forgiving is not trying to pretend that no hurt has been done and that the person who hurt you is really quite a nice fellow after all. If someone cheats again and again, it might be possible to forgive that person but it would be foolish to put your wholehearted trust in such a person.

Forgiveness is not about making excuses for the person who has wronged us, if there were good reasons for their action, there would be no need of forgiveness just a good excuse; they have been justified by the excuse.

Forgiveness involves seeing others as ourselves, flawed and sinful and it recognizes that Jesus Christ died for them as well as for us.

Forgiveness holds on to the belief that one day God will put all things right and that all pain and anguish will be ended and replaced with joy and love: A time and a state when even if we do remember those things that we experienced in this life, then none of those memories will cause even the slightest of discomfort or pain.

If someone has hurt you, start praying for them and you will find in time your heart softening and the pain that they have caused you will become manageable, the hurt you feel may not disappear entirely, but you will begin to be freed from anger, resentment and if present, even hatred and revenge. Forgiving someone does not make them good, it

does not guarantee they will not hurt you or others again, but it does work wonders in the heart of the person who forgives.

You will all know that when a person cannot forgive, they can suffer terribly from recriminations, guilt, anger, and the desire for revenge. Not being able to even desire to be able to forgive causes more pain for the person who believes themselves to have been wronged.

Surely this is why Jesus taught us to forgive others as we are forgiven, it is for our own spiritual and emotional well-being, the more we are able to forgive, the more open we are to forgiveness.

All of us have been hurt and all us are likely to be hurt again by the actions or words of others, and we surely desire the hurt to go away. Sometimes we want revenge, we want the person that hurt us to hurt too, but contrary to what some might say, revenge does not take the pain away, it adds to it. Only forgiveness can release us from the anger we might feel toward those who have hurt us and only forgiveness can set us free from the guilt we may feel having wronged others.

Christ has forgiven us, and set us free, and we must seek God's help to forgive others, for our own sake, for their sake, and for Christ's sake.

Amen!

Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray for this world God so loves.

O God, your unfailing love has been
the source of our strength.
It has led us through troubled waters
and away from our enemies.
In your infinite love,
you have had pity on us and heard our cries.
Because of your faithful love and mercy,
we bring our concerns to you, O God.

For the universal church—
that it would be an instrument of your love,
forgiveness, and grace.
God in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

For the global community—
that we would learn to live for each other
in peace and cooperation, and share
collective responsibility.
God in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

For our local community
[local concerns may be named].

God in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

For those who suffer in their minds, bodies, or souls—
wrap your arms around them in love
and help us, the church, to care for them.
God in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

For the silent intentions we hold in our hearts.

[A time of silence is kept.]

God in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Glory be to the Father,
and to Jesus Christ the Son,
and to the Holy Spirit. Amen

Commemoration of the Faithful Departed

And now, Father, bring to our remembrance the unity of the church in heaven and on earth, fill us with the joy of the faithful departed, and keep us faithful to you all the days of our service here on earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Who taught us to pray, when He said, 'Our Father...'

The Lord's Prayer

OUR Father which art in heaven,
Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:
For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,
For ever. Amen.

The Blessing

The Blessing of God Almighty, The Father, The Son and the Holy Spirit be upon you. Amen!