

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 14th Sunday after Trinity – 13th September 2020

Reflection

Jane Quarmby, Reader

Today's Gospel reading is about forgiveness, and Jesus giving an example of one man being forgiven a huge amount of debt, but in turn not forgiving someone else who owes him a lot less. In those days 10,000 talents was an unbelievably large sum of money, around 340 metric tons of silver - millions of euros akin to the whole tax revenue of Galilee and impossible to repay. So the king having pity on him and letting him off was merciful in the extreme.

Sadly, the man forgiven was not so merciful to someone else who owed him a few thousand and had him arrested. However, he didn't get away with it as his colleagues went to the king and snitched on him. He ended up being tortured until he had paid his debt in full. No nice ending to this story for once – Jesus is very clear that if we do not forgive those around us then we too will be tortured. Prison and torture here are a metaphor for hell.

So it's a big deal this forgiveness business – if we don't forgive others then we will suffer. Is that fair? Someone hurts us, and we must forgive them?

What exactly is forgiveness? I looked it up and most definitions agree that it is a conscious and deliberate decision to release feelings of resentment, hatred or vengeance towards a person or group who has hurt you, regardless of whether they actually deserve your forgiveness. It's not for us to judge, remember – that's God's job.

Judith Altman, whose family were murdered by the Nazis in the Second World War, put it like this: “I certainly have all the reasons in the world to hate, but hate destroys you, not them. Use your energy for good things and better things.”

Farid Ahmed, who lost his wife in the shooting at the mosque in Christchurch not that long ago, said afterwards, “I don’t want a heavy heart boiling like a volcano with anger, fury and rage – it burns itself and its surroundings. I want a heart full of love, care, and mercy. This heart does not want any more lives to be lost, any other humans to go through the pain I have gone through. That’s why I am choosing peace and I have forgiven.”

It takes conscious effort to forgive someone who has harmed you – whether it be on a scale like Mr. Ahmed’s hurt and loss, or on a more everyday level when someone is rude to you, or steals something from you, or makes a fool of you. Is it really worth all the bad temper and upset caused by someone stealing your car parking space that you have to get out and hit them as I’ve seen too often on the news bulletins? Surely better to be free of that corrosive burning anger and have peace of mind, to let go of those negative feelings and move on with your life and embrace healing for yourself.

Anger and rage, that desire to get even, can split friendships and families, lead to violence and yet more violence. We see it in every country of the world – tempers flaring, people taking sides, violent clashes with each other, police trying to keep some order and people getting hurt and being killed. We see it in America now, a nation heading towards division. It isn’t healthy and it isn’t good. It’s dangerous, which is why Jesus was clear that if we cannot find it in our hearts to forgive, then we will be punished.

And we will be punished sooner than we think. To live with that kind of attitude to others harms us as much as it does them. It makes us into people that aren’t good to know, cuts us off from others, harms our health and cuts us off from God. It makes us bitter and angry.

It’s important, however, to realise what forgiveness is not. It is not glossing over something, or ignoring things that hurt you, it isn’t about forgetting what has been done to you or downgrading the seriousness of it. It is not about making excuses or condoning something or ignoring it. No one can really forgive and forget as though nothing has happened. And it’s no good running away from confrontation

either – we must face up to bad behaviour and tackle it. But as and when we are involved in a confrontation, then we need to be open and honest, not come to it from the point of view of having to win, or getting one's own back, but of seeing one another's point of view. There's an old saying about marriages when they fail – "the fault was half a dozen on one side and six on the other side."

Tom Wright explains it like this "Forgiveness isn't like a Christmas present that a kindly grandfather can go ahead and give to a sulky grandchild even if the grandchild hasn't bought a single gift for anyone else. It isn't like the meal that will be waiting for you back home even if you failed to buy a cheese sandwich and a cup of tea for a tramp on the street. It's a different thing altogether. Forgiveness is more like the air in your lungs. There's only room for you to inhale the next lungful when you've just breathed out the last one. If you insist on withholding it, refusing to give someone else the kiss of life they so desperately need, you won't be able to take in any more in yourself..... If (we) are open, able and willing to forgive others, (we) will also be open to receive God's love and forgiveness."

There are those who say that there can be no forgiveness without repentance. If someone can't see how much they have hurt someone else, or feel bad about it, how can they be forgiven? Why is it hard to say "sorry"? It is a lot easier to forgive someone when they are genuinely sorry, and when they really want our forgiveness. It's much harder when someone couldn't care less about what they have done to us, or just doesn't see what harm they have done to us. The very act of forgiving someone can be hard to do, as many worthwhile things are. That doesn't mean we don't forgive because if we want God to forgive us for all the things we have done, then we must learn to do likewise to those around us. As we pray in the Lord's prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Jesus knew we would find this forgiveness business hard to do and so gave us the words to ask God to help us with it. If we want to be forgiven, then we must be prepared to forgive too.

Peter thought he was being generous, forgiving 7 times, but is teased by Jesus – no, 70 times 7! If you are counting how many times you forgive, then you aren't really forgiving at all – just postponing revenge.

God's forgiveness is endless – and so must ours be.

Amen