

**Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> September 2020**  
**Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity**

**Collect**

Merciful God,  
your Son came to save us  
and bore our sins on the cross:  
may we trust in your mercy  
and know your love,  
rejoicing in the righteousness  
that is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

**Romans 14:1-12**

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgement on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgement on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God.

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God. For it is written,

'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,  
and every tongue shall give praise to God.'

So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

**Matthew 18:21-35**

Then Peter came and said to Jesus, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'

'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave

released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

## Sermon

A few years ago I was invited to attend a session of the Sycamore Tree project at Send Prison. Sycamore Tree is a volunteer-led victim awareness programme that teaches the principles of restorative justice. It is taught in prisons in groups of up to 20 learners, over a 6-week period. Learners on the programme explore the effects of crime on victims, offenders, and the wider community, and discuss what it would mean to take responsibility for their personal actions.

I was attending the final session, during which learners have an opportunity to express their remorse – some write letters, poems or create works of art or craft. Members of the community are invited to support and bear witness to these symbolic acts of restitution.

However, for most learners on Sycamore Tree the most powerful element of the programme is when a victim of crime comes in to talk through how crime has impacted their lives. Learners do not face their own victims, but rather are encouraged to consider the impact of their actions on their own victims and society more generally by hearing first hand from a victim of crime.

Restorative justice works on the basis that it is only by enabling those who have committed crimes to fully understand the impact of what they have done and take responsibility for their actions that relationships can be restored, enabling all parties to move forwards positively. What I heard on that day was moving and profound, each story a testimony to the change that was taking place in people's lives. And the evidence is that restorative justice works. It takes time and is resource intensive, but it is one of the most successful ways of moving people out of the criminal justice system for good.

This morning's reading opens with Peter asking Jesus about forgiveness. Specifically he wants to know how often he should forgive, and sets as his goal seven times. We all know that seven is a significant number in the scriptures, so perhaps Peter was hoping that this would appeal to Jesus. From the time he had spent with Jesus, he must have had a growing sense of the significance of forgiveness. And we also need to remember that this passage comes directly after last week's gospel reading, the passage in which Jesus spoke about resolving conflict. As I explained last week, that passage should be seen more as points of principle than as a blueprint for conflict resolution. Perhaps Peter was seeking greater clarity.

And, as so often happens, Jesus confounds Peter's expectations. Instead of forgiving someone who has sinned against us seven times, we must in fact forgive them seventy-seven times. And we know that what Jesus means is not that we should literally count seventy-seven acts of forgiveness, but rather that forgiveness should be our nature. The significance of seventy-seven is not in its precision, but in the fact that it is a number that is sufficiently large that we will lose count. So we need to keep on forgiving.

Having pronounced that Peter must forgive seventy-seven rather than just seven times, Jesus tells a parable, the familiar parable of the unforgiving servant. Once again, Jesus is trying to explain to his followers the values of the Kingdom of Heaven. And so he introduces them to a King who is owed a vast sum of money by a slave. The King asks for payment, and when it is not forthcoming, demands that the slave should be sold in order that he can recoup his money. But the slave begs for patience, claiming that he will repay. And the King, out of pity, releases him and forgives him the debt.

As the slave leaves the King's court, he encounters a fellow slave, who owes him a far smaller sum of money. He demands payment, and the fellow slave begs for patience and promises to repay. Yet, unlike the King, the slave throws his fellow slave in prison until he can pay.

As I have explained, what Jesus is talking about in this parable is the values of the Kingdom of Heaven, and that is important. It can be easy to assume that the characters in a parable are representative – for example, that the King represents God. But this need not be the case. Parables are largely non-specific. Their value is that they can be told and re-told over and over again, to quite different communities at quite different times, and still they have something to say.

When the King releases the slave and forgives him the debt, we hear that he does so out of pity. But we do not know his motivations. He may have felt genuine compassion. Or it may have been a more pragmatic decision. He may have felt that having someone likely to behave favourably towards him out of a sense of duty might be more valuable than selling them on to someone else, or throwing them in prison. Likewise, we do not know why it is that the slave fails to be forgiving. Whether it was an act of spite; or of greed; or of fear. Whether he genuinely needed repayment.

It seems to me that two factors are absolutely essential in this morning's reading. The first is that Jesus wants us to make forgiveness a part of our nature. He recognises that unless we are ready to forgive, relationships will always be fractured. While Jesus never spoke about restorative justice, the principle is the same. It is only by restoring relationships that we can move forward and build something positive.

And the second factor is perhaps the most important of all. When Jesus says to Peter that he must forgive seventy-seven times and not the seven times that Peter already felt was a noble goal, he doesn't do so in the belief that forgiveness is easy. Even those of us who have experienced minor acts of wrongdoing against us know how hard it can be to forgive. How easy it can be to hold on to that sense of grievance. How tempting it can be to bring the matter up from time to time, rather than letting it rest. And for those who have experienced more serious wrongdoing, that challenge is so much greater.

Forgiveness for us can feel like an impossible ask. And that is why it is a matter of faith. It is something that we return to in our prayer. Because in our own strength it may very well feel impossible, but with God's strength so much more becomes possible.

The forgiveness that Jesus speaks of is not about accepting ill treatment. Just as restorative justice recognises, we all need to take responsibility for our actions, and make restitution where required. It is about the restoration of relationships. Just like the parable of the lost sheep, it is about trying to ensure that not one little one should be lost, because that is God's most fervent longing.

Amen