

**17<sup>th</sup> September 2023**

**15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity**

**Bishop Richard Harries Sermon**

**Matthew 18.21-35**

At every opportunity, a mother visited her son in prison. He had got caught up in the world of drugs and found himself in deeper and deeper trouble. On these visits he treated his mother badly and was often aggressive with her. But she persisted. She was not going to give up on him.

The theme of today's Gospel is forgiveness and the reason I begin with this illustration is because forgiveness is all about maintaining a relationship despite the hurt. Images like wiping the slate clean or writing off someone's debt can be misleading if they blur the fundamental fact that it is about holding someone in a relationship despite everything, as that mother did with her son: as God does with us.

The emphasis which Jesus gave to forgiveness in his teaching is quite startling and distinctive. Not the idea that God will forgive us if we turn to him- that was already there in Judaism. But the stress on our obligation to forgive other people. It is of course there in the Lord's prayer 'Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.' Today's vivid parable makes the point with exceptional force. Someone owed a huge sum of money. They pleaded with the lender for mercy, and they were let off. But the person who had just been forgiven their debt started to pursue someone who owed them a relatively small sum and despite their pleas refused to help them. Not surprisingly the original lender turned on the one he had let off and now made him pay the whole debt. As the parable ends 'So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

Does God really withhold his forgiveness from us if we refuse to forgive others? Perhaps God's forgiveness of us and our willingness to forgive others are so intimately linked because if we harden our hearts to those who have hurt us, we make ourselves into people who are incapable of receiving the forgiveness of God.

The other distinctive aspect of the teaching of Jesus in the reading is that this forgiveness is to be without limit. Peter asks if we should go on forgiving others as many as seven times and he receives the reply 'until seventy times seven.' Time and again the mother says to herself after a bad visit to her son 'That's the last time I am going to see him' but she finds she cannot give up on him. She does go to visit him again.

Christianity thinks of heaven as an environment, a context, of perfect harmony, of reconciliation and mutuality. Both the difficulty and the crucial importance of the teaching of Jesus on forgiveness can be seen if we think about Ivan Karamazov's critique of it in Dostoevsky's great novel The Brothers Karamazov. He argues first that no future life can justify the suffering in this one, especially the suffering of children. Then, in particular he cannot envisage or morally accept a heaven of universal forgiveness- of someone who has been tortured embracing their torturer for example.

What this does first of all is to remind us that it is possible to speak of forgiveness in too easy a manner. There is a moral case against forgiving people if it suggests that what they have done is anything less than heinous. This is an issue that has arisen in the past when Jews have been asked if they are willing to forgive what happened to them in the holocaust. It is not a question that should be asked of them.

But that having been said heaven, on a Christian view, must be an environment of universal reconciliation; of mutual forgiveness by people rooted in the forgiveness of God in Christ. Heaven is not about the alone with the alone but about redeemed community. From a human point of view this seems totally impossible. How could all

those who have suffered from the evil of others forgive them and go on holding them in a positive relationship. It seems totally impossible morally and in reality. Yet how could heaven be heaven without that? We come back to some words Jesus said in another context “What is impossible for humans is possible for God. For God, all things are possible.’

And occasionally we do get glimpses of this possibility. It begins in the New Testament itself, with the words of Jesus on the cross. ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’ This was shortly followed by Stephen who when he was being stoned to death cried out ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them. In the modern world I think of Bishop Leonard Wilson who was tortured by the Japanese during World War II who later confirmed those who had tortured him. There have been those in Northern Ireland during the troubles like Gordon Wilson who have worked for forgiveness despite cruel personal loss.

In South Africa we had Desmond Tutu’s ‘Truth and reconciliation commission’ sought to overcome the brutality of the past by just such a process. In this country ‘Restorative justice’ tries to go beyond anger and punishment to something better. None of this is easy. For some it does not seem morally possible. None of it should take away from the fact that hurt is hurt, that the innocent have suffered, that wrong has been done. Yet within God’s kingdom the push must be towards universal reconciliation.

The Christian community, our church St Mary’s here is Barnes, is meant to be such a sign, a sacrament, of that ultimate community in God’s Kingdom. We are to be held together by an inclusive mutual concern and prayer.

And we begin this process in our own hearts, by not bearing grudges, by not excluding others from the circle of our concern, by holding them close to God in prayer.

Richard Harries