

Love is Merciful – Reflection for 14th Sunday after Trinity (13th September 2020)

Matthew 18: 21-35

Then Peter came and said to him, “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 would 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 would 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.”

Forgive us our sins as we forgive others – or perhaps the other way round; may we forgive as God has forgiven us. We pray that phrase at least weekly in church, most of us daily. What a changed world we would see if everyone could embrace that.

Last week’s gospel text, which puts this one in the right place, was about speaking out – confronting disagreements in community, even excluding the wayward who threatens the security and peace of the group. We noted that Jesus words are not a blueprint but a guide to the *spirit* of the law – to the love that drives the teaching and actions of Jesus and the Church. The love for all people and the cohesion of the church in particular, is at stake.

So Peter says, but how many times must I forgive? You can almost feel his frustration – what if they just don’t take any notice and continue again and again to play up and disobey? And we know in our hearts that the answer is to forgive as many times as we ourselves have missed the mark. As many times as we have confessed and yet again have been forgiven by the love and extraordinary grace of God. ‘Forgiveness is a deep reservoir of grace that ought never to run dry!’

You probably all know that I love gardening – particularly guerrilla gardening. That is spotting the tatty bits of ground in the district and clearing, planting and nurturing those places. So I joined the local Westgate Gardening Group. We all have slightly different emphases for doing this – one is an environmentalist, another a litter picker – bothered about the careless mess and ugliness, another like me loves gardening, and I find it a wonderful way to get to know my neighbours and an opportunity to look out for them in a non-threatening way to draw them nearer to God. The neighbours and the Gloucester city homes personnel, the guys that come and clear away the bottles, cans and needles and so on.

But oh what a challenge it is around here. At my end of the district we have a lot of seriously unwell people – both physically and mentally and they either can’t or won’t help. But gradually I have

encouraged them to weed and water a bit. But then they'll forget – or get sicker and be unable to manage. Passers-by throw rubbish or walk all over my nicely planted up plots. Whatever.

Helen, my labouring friend at the other end faces tougher challenges. She plants up the space – the plants get stolen and dogs use the plot as a toilet. She begs more plants and tidies up again. And again. She even put a little fence around one plot to dissuade folk from treading on it.... the fence has been er – removed! So we rant a bit, figure out measures to help – little signs saying this has all been done by volunteers for the benefit of the community, more security cameras etc – and on we go again.

You see we know that many of these folk have absolutely no sense of their own worth, they have experienced grim upbringing, scarce resources and most of the time, are too caught up in their own struggles to notice that the sun is shining. So we must forgive. We must plod on and re-do it. And do you know? Bit by bit, the rubbish issue is declining, many are offering a hand occasionally – commitment is still far off but hey we are getting there.

Helen is not yet a believer in Jesus but she and the others recognise the value of community and hanging on in there. And if through this I can encourage them in their efforts, great. Even more if I can encourage them to ponder and seek God then Halleluja. Dear congregation – there is a whole new church hovering out there.

I can't do this without a sad bit of hesitation though. Because the Church (broadly of course) is riven with disputes, factions and defeatism – a failure of some individuals to hang on in there with a congregation and so throwing in the towel. How many people do you know who say – oh I don't go to church anymore because...etc.

We are blessed here in our little church community – I think we rub along together pretty well. But we are not perfect are we? It is all too easy to back off, to withdraw and hold the community loosely if at all. However, 'Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing,' says the writer to the Hebrews. Let us keep on encouraging each other and indeed forgiving each other.

Paul wrote: 'Accept him whose faith is weak without passing judgement on disputable matters...' so much of what we get het up about is not actually important. We must take care of the battles we pick – is this dispute really over an issue that will harm the community? Or is it simply a matter of taste or particular leaning? If it is the former, then we must be brave and lovingly speak out – if it is the latter then a light hearted discussion about it is probably all that is necessary – how many times have we been upset about something simply because it hurts something much deeper we are wrestling about. And in all things – mercifully love – forgive.

Let us hear Jesus clearly, do not give up – keep working at the relationships, keep forgiving. Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury when asked about the mess the church gets itself in, spoke of the fact that being open is helpful – we do hang out our dirty washing, sometimes it puts people off. But honestly it is a challenge to those outside. The very fact that we do stick together, we do forgive and stay together – noticeable in this so very fractious world of ours – it is a massive witness.

So in this weird state of pandemic people are looking, seeing, and thinking 'what is it about you lot that holds you together in little communities like this? What is this God that draws you and keeps you?'

Well, God's love is not only tough – it speaks the truth and calls to holiness, but God's love is also merciful – deeply, wonderfully, graciously and endlessly forgiving.

Amen

Revd. Anna Griffiths