

Sermon Sunday 13th September 2020

Gospel, Matthew 18: 21-35: Forgiveness

This is one of the starkest stories that Jesus told. According to Matthew's decision of where to place the parable, it is part of the teaching that Jesus gave under the theme of how Christians should treat each other.

The chapter comes within a visit to Galilee, in which the disciples have been impressed by the rule-bound nature of the power of the Jewish state. They have been impressed by the orderly collection of taxes in the synagogue in Capernaum, and by the sense of order that they see in their Jewish society.

Angela and I, and other pilgrims from this diocese last year, were also impressed by a visit to Jerusalem. We were impressed by its inclusion of ancient buildings into a modern city; by its amalgamation of historic sites and modern transport and communication. You could say that while whizzing round the ring roads in an airconditioned bus, we tended to miss the less pleasant sights, the divisions in society and the countless children trying to raise money by side of the road.

That leads, at the beginning of chapter eighteen of Matthew's gospel, to the disciples' question about "Who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Jesus's striking reply is that a randomly-chosen child is the greatest, and whoever wants to enter God's kingdom must enter it like a little child. Jesus' story of the lost sheep emphasises that we should be concerned about where our brothers (and sisters) are in relation to God: we should be concerned about their spiritual whereabouts, and make them our priority. Perhaps Jesus sees the anonymity of town life: the lost sheep who can walk unnoticed there. He says "the Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost." (chap. 18: 14)

Jesus's explanation of how to treat those who "sin against you" is a response to Peter's question (v.21): "When someone has sinned against me, how many times must I forgive (him)?" Jesus story replies to Peter, raising a reminder of painful human experiences, when someone offends against us and when someone refuses to listen to our version of a story.

Looking at the modern internet it appears that there is real understanding of the need for forgiveness in our modern society: a desire for it. An impression from the number of Gurus, who put up their thoughts on the internet about how to forgive someone, is that forgiveness is often needed nowadays, especially when close relationships come to an end.

How many times should I forgive someone, was a question which was frequently addressed to Jewish rabbis. For a Jew the question would mean how many times must I forgive my fellow Jew who wrongs me. So does Peter's question, which states how many times must I forgive 'my brother', mean my fellow Christian? Most of the new translations of the Bible assume it does mean that: how often should we forgive our fellow Christians.

Jesus's response illustrates the revolutionary nature of the setting up of the Church. The Rabbis would often have answered the question that the Jewish believer should forgive three times. Peter realises that something new is being presented to them so he suggests he should forgive seven times. This produces a surprising response from Jesus. That our forgiveness should be unlimited, which is what the number implies.

Jesus story is about what The Kingdom of Heaven is like. A king settles accounts with his servants. The man-servant who is brought to him has taken, or lost, a very large amount of public money. The sum lost is equivalent to the entire sum of taxes collected in a geographical region over a whole year. A 'billion pounds' would be a way to translate it. 'All that debt' is mentioned in v. 32. The man must be a fraudster, a corrupt Regional official.

How to deal with someone like this, who has lost so much? Punishment is declared for the man and his wife, and children. All must be sold as slaves to repay the debt. The man asks for patience and time to repay, which surely he will never be able to do. But, surprisingly, the King cancels his debt – completely unnecessarily. Why? The king "took pity on him". Words about Jesus had led up to this (Matt: 9: 36): 'When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.' The same word is used about the dishonest servant as about Jesus compassion on the crowds. It is a picture of the freedom and generosity of God's forgiveness.

The corrupt servant is allowed to walk free, but on his journey home he meets a man who owes him a small amount of money. (It equals a 'six hundred thousandth' of the earlier sum). Notice his violent approach: he grabs his fellow-servant and nearly chokes him. Using the same words, the junior servant begs for time to pay. The already-forgiven servant refuses, he who had claimed he could not could not pay what he owed. He had the lesser debtor thrown into prison. Why? Impatience? Bullying? Didn't want to be thought weak?

Other servants reported this to the king. Question: How would you expect a human ruler to behave? Words of worldly wisdom of the parables. Story is told so that it is the man who refuses to forgive who is in the wrong,

So the king hands the corrupt servant over to the jailers to be tortured until he coughs up. He has to be forced to confess where he has stashed away the money that has gone missing.

Jesus teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven. Forgiveness and generosity is very important to God, because that is the way we have been treated. In the Lord's prayer we are reminded that our forgiveness is conditional: "Forgive us our sins as we forgive ..." (Matt: 6:12.) We are called to forgive others "From your heart" (Matt 18: v.35) . A forgiving attitude is what God requires. Generosity. Be like the King who forgives unreasonably.

The point is that those who will insist on only judging others, will not be able to find forgiveness. It is suggested that those who cannot see their own need for forgiveness, are those who not capable of seeing why they are called to forgive others.

Shouldn't we be generous to those who are different from us? Later in this service, both in church and online in Zoom, there will be a talk about the charity we will support for this coming month, *The Friends of the Holy Land*. This charity is designed to transfer funds to Palestinian Christians who suffer many pressures and problems in their daily lives in Israel and the Middle East. Website: <https://www.friendsoftheholylan.org.uk>

Amen