

MATTHEW 18: 21-35 Forgiveness

Online and CCO 13th September 2020

Father, open our hearts and our minds to you word, we pray. Amen.

I have recently spent some time over with my family in Cheshire, looking after my two little grandsons, aged 6 and just 4. They are of course very lively and great fun, and being two little lads they enjoy a rough and tumble; it starts out quite friendly but sometimes gets a bit out of hand. I hear myself saying, "Stop now, or this will end in tears" and very often it does. One or the other receives a kick or a punch, launched in desperation, or gets squashed on the floor. And it hurts. And the injured party is most upset! "Now look!" I say to the other, "you've hurt your brother! What do you say?" And often there will come a rather quiet, mumbled, "Sorry", which doesn't really convince anyone! We then have a discussion and agree that the one hurt was probably provoking the other one, and there was fault on both sides, and peace is restored. There is forgiveness and harmony – until the next time! Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother??

Sometimes there is a more serious misdemeanour, when forgiveness from a parent or grandparent must be sought. I find it interesting to watch this learning process. These boys know they will be forgiven, because they know they are loved. And they have to learn, as do we all, that forgiveness isn't just something you can take for granted. Forgiveness comes at a cost, and we try to teach our children to recognise that they have done wrong and that they need to amend their behaviour. It isn't enough simply to mumble a quick 'Sorry' and then carry on as before.

As they get older, they understand the importance of not doing wrong things, of not hurting other people by words or deeds. They begin to glimpse the seriousness of what they do. And then they feel remorse. And that remorse can be profound, and deeply upsetting. Then the parent has to show that the child has been forgiven, that the relationship has not been permanently broken, that reconciliation

is both possible and real. That can be a moment of great tenderness and is, I think, key to our development as human beings.

It also helps us to understand today's Gospel. The last verse, warning that if we do not forgive others, we shall be treated by God in the same way as the unforgiving servant was treated by his master, that is quite chilling. Surely God must forgive us, mustn't he? Isn't that what the Gospel message tells us?

Let's look at this more closely. We know, through the teaching, the death and resurrection of Jesus, that God does offer us forgiveness for all our sin, whoever we are, whatever we may have done, however we may have contributed to the sinfulness of our society. We can be forgiven. We see, in the cross, what that forgiveness and love costs. When we realise what God has done for us, when we open our hearts to receive his love and his forgiveness, our world changes. The darkness gives way to his light. We feel cleansed, we feel healed. We know that a change has been wrought in us that is not of our own doing. Our response to that has to be love. God's own love, reflected in us, shared with those around us, fighting for his Kingdom.

Once we have been reconciled with God, like the chastened child being allowed off the naughty step and making it up with Mummy or Daddy; once we have been given that fresh start, our natural response should be to do the same to others. That's what was expected of the servant in our Gospel passage. When his fellow-servants saw how he behaved to the one who owed him money, they were outraged, as we are. How could he accept his master's forgiveness, and then deny forgiveness to another? How can we rejoice that our sins are taken away, are cancelled, wiped out by the love and mercy of God – and then hold a grudge, or hold bitterness in our heart towards someone who has wronged us? We know that isn't right. But sometimes we just don't know what to do about it.

We might think that to forgive someone, is like saying "What you did to me is OK".

But that is not what Jesus means when he tells us to forgive. Jesus knows that forgiveness means healing, that when we are able to forgive, we are the ones who experience release. Sometimes forgiveness can bring reconciliation and healing of relationship – this might happen in families, where people are in contact with each other.

South Africa and Northern Ireland, under the leadership of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, experienced the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which brought together victims and perpetrators of violence, allowing the victims to express their pain and loss, and the perpetrators to come to a true recognition of what they had done, and be able to ask for forgiveness.

One of the most touching examples of this kind of forgiveness that I have come across is the story of Eric Lomax, The Railway Man. You may have seen the film or read the book. As we have just recently celebrated VJ Day, it's very relevant, the story of Eric, a Prisoner of War on the notorious Burma Railway, and the Japanese guard who brutally tortured him. They meet again, decades later, and a real and very surprising healing takes place, as Eric is finally able to forgive. It is powerful stuff. And the sense of release felt by them both is tangible.

But sometimes the one who has hurt us is remote, we're not going to see them. They probably don't even know that we don't forgive them and they probably aren't bothered anyway. What about them? Surely, to be forgiven, they have to express some kind of remorse? Don't they have to say sorry and somehow prove that they mean it?

Well, no. In such cases, the pain of unforgiveness isn't felt by them at all. WE are the one carrying that pain, that burden, that feeling of being knotted up inside, that bitterness, that rage. All those feelings are eating away at US, not at the other person! And, my friends, God wants to free us from all those feelings that just drag us down and stifle the life in us. He wants to lift us up into the kingdom of his love. And only He can do that. But he needs our YES to make it happen.

He waits patiently, yearning for the day when we will surrender to him and let him pour his healing balm on our bitter heart.

I recently found a brilliant metaphor of what this is like; it's from the Mercy UK organisation, that work with abused young women. Think of an oyster. If a bit of sand or some parasite manages to get inside the shell, it will start to irritate the soft body inside. The oyster is equipped with what it needs to solve the problem: the oyster can produce a substance called nacre, which wraps itself round the irritant sand or parasite, smothering it, smoothing it off so that it can do no harm. As the layers build up, it turns into – yes, you know, a pearl, something beautiful and precious. If the oyster doesn't produce the nacre, the irritant or parasite will damage and harm the oyster and even kill it.

God knows all about the hurts in our lives, and he has given us what we need to overcome them. We don't have nacre, but we do have the power to forgive, which he will give us if we will only accept it. Instead of being eaten up inside by the hurts we suffer, we can transform them into pearls of beauty, as we allow God's love to heal and release us. It may not happen all at once. It may be a process through which we have to grow. But we know we can trust God, and we know that he can make us able to forgive and enjoy new life with him. Amen.