

**13 September 2020; Trinity 14/ Proper 19**

**Romans 14: 1-12; Matthew 18: 21-35**

*Ashdon 9.30am*

**1. Forgiveness is central to our faith**

Today's theme is forgiveness, and we know that this is a topic that is of central importance to us as people of faith. It features in the prayer that Jesus taught us, where we ask God to forgive us in the same way that we exercise forgiveness. And almost every service in church contains prayers in which we confess our sins and ask for God's forgiveness.

Yet forgiveness is a broad topic. The damage we may sustain at the hands of each other ranges from accidental slights to deliberate harm. Accidental slights or grievances might be an off the cuff remark that we take as an insult, or being overlooked when we feel we deserve better. Even such incidents can easily fester and be hard to let go. Indeed, we speak of 'nursing a grievance' – looking after it, dwelling on it. And if such grievances are hard to forgive and leave behind us, how much harder is it to forgive real hurts that may be deliberately inflicted upon us. We are listening at present to the official enquiry into the Manchester bombings in which 22 people died. How could I possibly forgive someone who killed my child? Yet there are powerful examples of people in similar situations who have been

able to forgive. I don't know about you, but I am always amazed and incredibly impressed when I hear of such people. I am impressed by a man such as Nelson Mandela who spent so much of his life in prison yet was able to emerge from that time in a way that led to healing not just for himself but for the very divisions that has led to his imprisonment.

Central our faith it may be, but in human terms forgiveness is hard to practice. What then can we learn from today's readings?

**2. Tolerance and lack of judgement from Paul**

The passage we heard today from Paul's letter to the Romans is uncharacteristically clear and straightforward. It deals, if you like, with one end of the spectrum, offering advice about how to live with others whose opinions differ from our own. He gives some simple examples, - differences about whether it is right to eat meat or to observe the Sabbath. These are easily translated into today's terms, and, since his advice is for church members, might include those who favour women priests or those who prefer the King James Bible. Every church community, indeed every human community,

contains those with strong views about different aspects of faith or life. And Paul urges that we should cultivate a non-judgemental attitude, being aware that in the context of our service of God, these things are not important – and where they are, it is God who is the judge, not ourselves. This perhaps represents the softer end of the spectrum in terms of things we may be called upon to overlook for the greater good, and his message is relatively easy both to understand and even to put into practice. But what about our gospel reading?

### **3. Gospel parable**

In response to a question from Peter, Jesus tells a parable, and it is a memorable one. It starts with a king, who forgives a huge debt. We then learn about the reactions of the slave who has been forgiven. In contrast to the generosity of the king, this man is mean minded and refuses to forgive a much smaller debt owed by a fellow slave. Hearing of this, the king is angry and punishes him. Jesus tells us that this is how God will treat us if we fail to forgive each other. Is this story just a kind of wake up call: you had better forgive each other or else God will punish you? Let's take it in slow motion and see what we can learn from it.

### **4. Lessons for us**

First of all, the parable starts with the King, who is God. Do we really believe that God has forgiven us a huge debt, and do we truly understand this? I suggest that we frequently forget it, or overlook our own sinfulness. We try to lead good lives, to behave decently, loving those close to us and cultivating tolerance and avoiding too much focus upon our own sinfulness. We are fortunate to live in a civilised society where we enjoy many benefits and generosity is relatively easy. Often our sins are more of omission than commission. This is why Jesus repeatedly said that it was easier for those who were really sinful and knew their own faults to enter the kingdom of Heaven. These are those who know their faults and their need of help. In his day, the tax gatherers and prostitutes. In our own day, perhaps those on the edges of society who struggle to make ends meet and so are drawn into behaviour that aids their own survival, even when they know that it is harmful to themselves or others.

One who was totally aware of how much God had forgiven him was the former slave trader John Newton, who wrote Amazing Grace and other familiar hymns.

Many Christians, such as Charles Wesley, have come to see their own sinfulness as contributing to the death of Jesus. They- and we – may not have been there and actually part of those events, but it is our basic human sinfulness, shared with those who **were** there and no better or worse than we are, that led to this. John Newton and Charles Wesley were both deeply aware of their own need of God’s forgiveness.

The response of the slave in the parable to his own forgiveness was not to forgive his fellow. Was he grateful to the King for his own deliverance? One presumes he must have been since he escaped being sold with his family. Or did he simply think that the king has been soft and that he has got away with it? We don’t know, but what we do know is that awareness of his own deliverance has not led to the sort of gratitude that leads to generosity. So we need then to ask ourselves whether awareness of all that we enjoy – much of it undeserved – leads to generosity to others or not. Why me, we may ask when things are hard? Do we think we **deserve** good fortune?

Finally, to the issue of punishment. In the parable, the king is furious, and we can understand his anger. ‘He hands the slave over *‘to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt’*. As someone pointed out, not very practical since presumably torture

would not lead to an ability to pay. Yet there is an important point here for us too. It might remind us that failing to forgive does lead to both personal and social damage. We are familiar with the situation where the person who nurses a grievance – perhaps over small personal slights – themselves becomes bitter and twisted, unable to see beyond an increasing obsession with how hard done to he or she has been. A form of torture. And socially, too lack of forgiveness leads to huge damage in society. We can see this is the on-going hostilities in Northern Ireland. In Pakistan, where we lived for 7 years, our hospital saw patients brought in as the result of injuries due to revenge killings spanning generations, and many died. In contrast, Nelson Mandela’s reaction when he was released from prison led to the ‘Truth and Reconciliation’ movement in South Africa and to the greater good.

Forgiveness is healing, not only for the one who is forgiven, but for the one who is able to forgive. Yes, it is incredibly hard to practice. And it is perhaps only possible if we have a true and deep sense of our own unworthiness and of God’s incredible grace. Grace is a term we often use in church – it means a gift that is not

earned. However hard we try, we cannot earn God's love and forgiveness. Yet it is freely given. It is this awareness, and perhaps only this awareness, that can free us from the cycle of revenge and damage that so often flows from our human nature and our sense that we deserve all that we have. May God give us insight into his grace, and the growing ability to forgive those who wrong us.       **Amen**