

A Reflection from Revd Ali – Sunday 13th September 2020 Trinity 14

Today's Gospel reading comes straight after Jesus' directive teaching about how we, as Christians, should deal with arguments. Jesus is practically equipping his disciples for some of the issues they will encounter, as a community of believers, after his death and resurrection. When Peter asks Jesus 'how often should I forgive?' He makes explicit the perennial question that has plagued Christians throughout the centuries. When am I allowed to stop forgiving someone who repeatedly offends me? Jesus' response, is to take Peter's suggestion of 7 times and to multiply it greatly. Then, to further emphasise the extent to which Christian communities should embody forgiveness, Jesus tells the parable that we sometimes call the 'parable of the unforgiving servant'. In the parable there is great emphasis on the amount of money involved. The first servant owed his master ten thousand Talents. The second servant owed the first servant one hundred Denarii. As we don't use Talents and Denarii here in Corley and Fillongley, it might be helpful to understand what the debts would equate to in Sterling. One Talent was equal to 6000 Denarii, so already we start to get an idea of the sums involved and the disparity of the debts. The first servant owed 60 million Denarii, the second 100 Denarii.

In first century Palestine, a Denarius would have been the normal day's wage for a labourer. The national minimum wage in the UK for anyone over 25 is £8.72 an hour. If an average working day is 8 hours, the equivalent of a denarius today would be £69.76. Therefore, the first servant owed over four thousand million pounds! There is no way he could pay back that amount, a fact that the king must have been aware of.

But in the parable, Jesus tells us that the king is settling accounts with his slaves, plural. If just one of his slaves owes him over four thousand million pounds, just how great is his wealth? Totally unimaginable. So, I wonder why there was such hyperbole in this parable?

Claire Benton-Evans suggests that by using this incredible, mind-boggling amount of money, Jesus was reminding Peter and us, of the unimaginable extent of grace God shows in forgiving human sinfulness.

Just as we find such huge sums of money difficult to comprehend, we also struggle to comprehend the terrible evil that is sometimes found in the world. We just have to pick up any newspaper or turn on the television news to see atrocities being carried out daily. The terrible news of the stabbings in Birmingham, innocent people on a night out being left for dead in an apparently motiveless attack. Reliving the horrific details of the Manchester bombings in the public enquiry that is currently ongoing. Remembering the 19th anniversary of the September 11th attacks. We also remember 7/7, the holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge and other equally evil acts. In our humanity, we struggle to grasp the full extent of such evil being perpetrated, let alone imagine the possibility of forgiving such dreadful things. The king in Jesus' story understands the enormity of the slave's debt. He understands that the slave cannot ever hope to repay the debt, but instead of insisting on payment, the king forgives the debt completely.

God in his mercy is like the king. God's endless mercy defies our abilities to add up the amount we owe. God's grace is so infinite that God can forgive us our sins without putting a dent into the divine balance sheet of grace.

The slave, despite his gratitude to the king for forgiving his enormous debt, does not extend the same mercy to his fellow slave. The debt he is owed in comparison to his own debt, is tiny. The first slave's behaviour when confronted by his debtor may tell us something of ourselves and our attitude to forgiveness. When the slave realises that he is not going to receive the money from his colleague, he grabs him by the throat, demands payment and when it is not forthcoming then has the man thrown in jail.

We too, like the slave, can receive and rejoice in God's forgiveness. The amazing grace that is freely given every day. We rejoice that God himself, in the person of Jesus Christ, died for us all and for the forgiveness of our sins, but we can still hold onto the hurt that someone else may have caused us by their actions or their words 10, 20 or even 30 years ago. Our multi million pound debt erased forever, whilst the debts owed to us are stored up, examined and remain unforgiven.

I am not saying that forgiveness is easy or should be automatic. In order for there to be forgiveness there has to be recognition of the debt. It is only when the slave realises the enormity of his debt and the consequences that he will have to face, that he begs for mercy. It is only when debtors acknowledge the overwhelming weight of their own debt, that they can they see the true greatness of God's mercy.

The king's quickly and willingly forgives the servant's debt rather than just granting extra time for payment. But how quickly the servant forgets the grace that he has received and neglects to show the same degree of grace. Those who receive God's freely given grace must pay it forward.

The slave's lack of forgiveness is witnessed by others and he is brought before the king again.

The slave's unwillingness to forgive reveals his lack of gratitude. His punishment is now even greater than the original punishment would have been.

Jesus was telling Peter, and us, that the church community should be a place of forgiveness. We, like Peter, should not put ourselves in the judgement seat of the king, but rather in the place of the slave. Receiving forgiveness and in the light of that forgiveness choosing also to forgive.

Forgiveness is a choice. Sometimes, we have to make the choice to forgive the same debt every day. Forgiveness can be hard work and can take time and need the help of others. But ultimately forgiveness brings freedom. Freedom from being tied into what can become a destructive and endless cycle of blame and retribution.

Forgiveness has to be appropriate. Unfortunately, this parable has been used by some Christian leaders to encourage victims of domestic violence to continually forgive their abusers, leading to years of abuse. In that situation, the abused person suffers not just at the hands of the abuser, but also from the absence of their fellow slaves, the ones who can and should cry out on their behalf bringing the abuser before judgement. There is a communal aspect to recognising debt that requires accountability before forgiveness can be given.

But, it is our experience of God's incredible forgiveness that gives us the strength to choose to exercise forgiveness. The God of grace and mercy encourages, and expects us, to be people who practice mercy, willingly, concretely and as a communal way of life. Giving thanks always, for the one who paid our multi-million pound debt once and forever.

Amen.