



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 17th September 2023

Readings: *Genesis 50.15-21; Psalm 103; Matthew 18.21-35*

Trinity XV

In my previous life, I used to come across people with a lot of responsibility in their denominations. I recall one, who had a brain as big as a bus and an ego the size of a peanut. He has a remarkable facility for communicating with all sorts and conditions of people in ways that meet them just where they are.

I remember hearing him debate in the Old Divinity School, pitting his wits against another renowned thinker, who had rather different convictions. Each was encountering their intellectual match, and they sparred with what seemed to me to be grace and genius; I understood neither.

I have a different memory of him as he addressed a cathedral full of secondary school students, who were eating from his hand as he opened eternal truths combining accessibility and depth.

On another occasion he spoke from this very platform, at an event for LGBT History Month, where, as a straight person best described as 'male, pale and frail', he knew in just a few hundred words how to embody radical solidarity without presuming to know it all.

And I still have a personal letter from him, which has running through its every line a seam of ecumenical generosity and pastoral sensitivity.

Matthew 17 and 18 have Jesus meeting all sorts of people, too, and speaking with them in ways that reached them where they were. He's equal to the smart aleck collectors of the temple tax; he listens to a father who kneels to implore him, 'Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly' – the father was heard, and the boy was healed; (Mt 17.15) he speaks to a rural crowd with stories about sheep; he talks to aspirational disciples about the truer greatness of being like a child; and when no one else is there, he gives Peter, James and John a confidential briefing about who he really is.

Jesus, too, seems to be able to connect with his audience, in all their variety, helping them get his point.

One of his special tools was the parables, and this morning we heard an example from Chapter 18. It is about forgiveness. On a related note, we also heard of Joseph's brothers, and their anxious plea for his mercy.

I suppose there are few of us who go through the whole of life with no need of forgiveness, whatever our station, role, or circumstances. Maybe we've treated another unfairly, or neglectfully, or abusively. Or have been arrogantly sure we were right, unwilling to learn from another's point of view or from their experience? Or do we abuse the power we have? We might not have left our brother for dead, at least not literally, nor had a debt of ten thousand talents forgiven, but if we *have*, the message is for us neither more nor less than for anyone else. Whatever our error, I wonder if there might be something in this parable of the king and his servant that will assist us as we think about forgiveness, however sophisticated or straightforward our thinking, however serious our offence or modest our peccadillo, however troubled our mind or deep our need.

I want to draw attention to six things that spoke to me as I read Matthew's narrative of Jesus using this parable to answer Peter's question. And I know six points sounds like two sermons, but stay with me.

First, Peter's request for advice about forgiveness refers to a specific group of people. He's concerned about 'if *another member of the church* sins against me ...'. This suggests to me that church people don't have a flawless infallibility; we sin like anyone else does. Rather followers of Jesus Christ have distinctive ways of responding to our imperfections. We might be trying to let

Christ rule our lives, and know that continually calls out of us Christ-like ethics and attitudes - honesty, mercy, compassion, generosity - but we also know so well that we don't always get it right. So, ironically, this parable reassures me that our flawed lives as Christians are less a sign that we are unusually bad Christians and more a reminder that Jesus' followers have always needed God's grace. You and I are no different – however long we have professed Christian faith, and however well-informed our understanding of Christianity might be.

Secondly, when Peter wonders whether seven is enough times to forgive this fellow church member, Jesus says, 'No, seventy times seven.' Now, I really don't think Jesus means that we must forgive someone 490 times, but when we observe the error for the 491st time we can attack and condemn them. No, this 'seventy times seven' is a classic example of Scripture's use of exaggeration to make a point. He means 'forgive more times than you can keep tabs on'. It's not a once off; it's not a box-ticking exercise before moving on. At seventy times seven, forgiveness is a way of life.

Thirdly, the King lets the servant off a *ten thousand talent* debt. We don't really know how much this is, but one theory suggests 'the total revenue of a wealthy province'.¹ A sizeable sum, anyway. Later, that servant's inability to forgive a colleague's *one hundred denarii* debt – possibly a few months' wages for a labourer - reminds us of the Lord's Prayer's key clause, which in the Scots version says, forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Writing to the Colossians, Paul puts it this way: 'just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.' (Col 3.13) It's to the point and needs no clarification – you've been forgiven, so why do you think we are exempt from forgiving others?

Fourthly, the parable tells of when the forgiven servant's brutality to his own debtor is seen, his fellow slaves were 'greatly distressed (Mt 18.31) Here is the intimation that forgiveness is noted and admired, just as harshness is noted and admonished. How easily we make peace with our own sin, and persuade ourselves it's nothing really, even as we make haste to point fingers, to find fault, and to blame others. Let's not be fooled – that is noticed.

Fifthly, the king is unimpressed, but not because the slave owed him ten thousand talents. His criticism of the 'wicked slave' is this: 'should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?' (Mt 18.33) You see, for most of us indebtedness is nowhere so monstrous as mercilessness. And mercilessness about another's indebtedness is all the more distasteful. Which is maybe why Foodbanks might be regarded as so rich an expression of the Gospel.

And lastly, central to this tale is that God, for whom the king in the story stands, wills to forgive, and gives the only begotten one to prove the point. Indeed, God *does* forgive, whether our debt is 10,000 talents, or 100 denarii. But he forgives with the hope of our richer life thereafter. So, our best response to being forgiven is to pray that we might have time for amendment of life – time in which daily to make St Richard's sophisticatedly simple prayer for gradual growth in the Christian virtues:

Dear Lord, of thee three things I pray:

to see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly, day by day.

May it be so, not because suddenly we deserve it, but because day by day whoever we are God makes new life possible.

Thanks be to God.

Amen

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¹ Beare, Francis Wright 1981 *The Gospel according to Matthew* Oxford: Blackwell page 382