



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on Sunday 13 September 2020

Readings: Genesis 50.15-21; Matthew 18.21-35

Why practice religion if it doesn't make any difference?

As a Christian, I look to faith in Jesus Christ to add something to life, to improve it; to redefine life, to change it.

And I have a hunch that little adds to, improves, redefines or changes life more than Christianity's emphasis upon forgiveness. Human nature isn't flawless. Individually and corporately, all of us have the capacity to get things wrong – sometimes subtly, but at other times spectacularly. In a world that so often tends towards responding to people's mistakes with what is seen as 'just deserts', the sort of forgiveness of which both Genesis and Matthew speak is pretty different.

Joseph and his eleven brothers had history. It's the stuff of so many families. Early in life, Joseph had so profoundly and persistently infuriated them that they wanted rid of him. Initially intent on fratricide, they eventually sold him into servitude. Years later, when they fall on hard times, but he has become a man of substance and status, he seizes the opportunity to effect reconciliation. Why on earth would Joseph treat his brothers as generously as he did, given what they had done to him? Not, surely, a determination that they get their just deserts. This is forgiveness that adds, improves, redefines and changes life all at once. For the brothers. For Joseph. For any of us who inhabit this story as part of our own.

Forgiveness is hard. Many of us struggle to get beyond what seems like the logical reaction to wrongdoing. It must be punished. Of course, there are behaviours that deserve a punishment that costs the perpetrator. Unpaid community service has benefits as it requires a person still to live responsibly, and at the same time to give something back to society. Deprivation of liberty also has its place, when an offender is a danger to self or others. Nevertheless, the Christian faith resists any knee jerk reaction which can only mete out justice that risks making things worse. The two finely crafted Bible passages we heard perhaps offer us help so that we can use forgiveness rather than vengefulness as the basis of renewed, committed and hope-filled relationships for individuals and for communities.

As I read the story of Joseph and his brethren, it strikes me that the brothers' action in selling their cocky sibling is about letting the past define everything. His teenage behaviour was not very attractive. Not all of mine was. And all they can see is that he is going to get what he deserves. It'll sort him, once and for ever. In the fulness of time, when everyone's circumstances are so different, Joseph is motivated less by his complex feelings from the past and more by what might yet be. Is it not because in his more mature years, he has greater desire to build a new tomorrow than to languish pointlessly in the past? 'He reassured them, speaking kindly to them'.

As I re-read that parable of the unforgiving servant, amidst its many strands, the thing that struck me with renewed impact was how the one who would not forgive had himself been so lavishly forgiven. Seventeen hundred years ago, Hilary of Poitiers interpreted Jesus's teaching that we are to forgive seventy times seven as a way of him saying we're to forgive as much as we are forgiven, and that is without measure. 70 x 7 doesn't mean forgive 490 times, but on the 491st give full vent to your vengefulness. It means forgive as you have been forgiven. That was where the unforgiving servant so missed the point. In John Chrysostom's moving words, 'he did not recognise the harbour by which he had escaped shipwreck.' Insensitive to the significance of the mercy he'd received, he was incapable of being merciful.

So, forgiveness that is more committed to the future than eaten up by the past, and showing to others the mercy we have been shown.

Easy to say, not so easy to do. And yet, just because they are not so easy to do, is no reason to ignore the fundamental difference those two emphases can make, in our families, in our workplaces, in our neighbourhoods, in our faith communities. This week alone, I have heard tell of four entirely unrelated situations where an insistence on 'just deserts' is destructive of peace, of joy, and of potential for a fruitful future. One is a family, one is a workplace, one is next door neighbours, and the last is a Christian congregation. Each is in crisis because of inability to move on from past errors, and because of failure to forgive as we are forgiven.

Is there not real potential in the Joseph and Jesus lessons shaping our personal lives, and our life as society? Even though, at its worst, religion has a hideous and lamentably continuing record of mercilessness, *at its best*, Christianity holds out to us these two precious models for forgiving, inviting us to apply them in our homes, our workplaces, our churches and our international relations.

That said, our faith does not merely offer good advice, like some sort of holier than thou guru; Christianity is about rather more than good ideas for self-help or staff handbooks. It is rooted in the grace of the God revealed in Jesus Christ - that Jesus, the narratives of whose living and dying and rising are all about how 'the LORD is merciful and gracious, and does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities'. We are bidden to treat one another mercifully, not because it is a cunning plan, but because that is how we are treated by God. It's awesome; it's life-giving; it makes a difference.

It doesn't just happen, of course. We don't always get it right. God knows we don't. Our capacity to forgive needs nurturing, all lifelong. We need regular reminders of 'the harbour by means of which we have escaped shipwreck'. That is why we worship, that is why we say the Lord's prayer, that is why we celebrate the sacrament: in order to be caught up week by week in the story of our rescue, and thus to be fashioned into those who will forgive.

For me, this is Christianity making a difference, as forgiveness so crucially adds to, improves, redefines and changes life. May the work of Jesus and the model of the more mature Joseph stir us so to revel in being forgiven that we are stirred to forgive.

Our music for reflection is an Agnus Dei by William Byrd – Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us.