

Sunday 17th September 2017 – Trinity 14 – P19

‘Forgive us our sins’

On the 10th September 2001 Jenny and I arrived in Rome as members of a party from Guildford Cathedral. The next day we visited St. Peter’s, after which a group of us began walking back to the convent where we were staying. It was late afternoon, and as we neared the convent a shopkeeper emerged from his shop asking if we were Americans to which I replied no. He then gave us the news that the World Trade Centre in America had been ‘attacked’. On reaching our residence, I ventured out into the square nearby where in one of the cafes a television screen was showing the twin towers on fire.

‘There are some deeds that are so monstrous they will drive us mad if we do not forgive them, because no proportional reparation is possible.’

Words quoted by a former Primus of Scotland – Richard Holloway in an article from his book entitled – ‘On Forgiveness’

From last Sunday's Gospel with its' theme of 'reconciliation', our readings today bring us to the theme of 'forgiveness' on this Battle of Britain Sunday.

As Christians, we are of course more than familiar with the phrase from the prayer given by Jesus to the church, the so called, 'pattern prayer' the 'Our Father', or as it is more widely known, albeit incorrectly, entitled, the 'Lord's Prayer'.

'Forgive us our sins (or debts) as we forgive those who sin against us.' It is only as we recognise the enormous debt that we owe to the Lord Jesus Christ, who, has himself through his death paid the price for our failures, that we realise how much more are we bound to follow in the way of Jesus himself.

The law may suggest that three strikes and you are out. Peter in our reading today, even suggests that perhaps seven times would be a reasonable number. But for Jesus, there is to be no limit in the forgiveness we offer to others, if we would truly follow his ways.

In the book of the prophet Amos (Ch 1 v 3, Ch 2 v 1), from where Peter perhaps gets his generosity of forgiveness, we read in the opening two chapters that for – ***‘three transgressions and for four, I (God) will not revoke punishment.’***

And because God was more generous than man, a man could not be more generous than God, and so limited his forgiveness to three times.

In the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ you may recall Jesus words to those listening to him.

‘So, when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift at the altar and go; first, be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.’ (Matt. 5 v 23/24)

In today’s language the debt of 10,000 talents, forgiven by the master in our Gospel reading, amounted to a ‘King’s Ransom’ something like £2.4 Million. The unforgiving servant however was only owed less than £5, in equivalent value, and for that

debt, was prepared to consign his fellow slave to prison.

This is a warning to all of us, that we cannot in God's eyes lead a life of double standards. And we certainly will not receive forgiveness ourselves, if that has not been the hallmark of our own lives. That is easy to say but far more difficult to put into practice.

For who among us, faced with some of the many atrocities we have seen perpetrated around the world, since that terrorist attack on America in 2001, would be able to forgive, and in these past years and even as we meet here this morning, the most recent atrocity committed against the Rohingya people in Burma.

It would also seem that many of the difficulties, which separate members of families and friends from one another, could often be overcome, if one of the persons in a dispute was to extend the hand of forgiveness.

As Christians, that is what is required of us, however difficult that might be. And only those who have had

to make such a step, can possibly know, what the effect of such a gesture can bring with it.

Harbouring grudges harms no one else but the person within whom, that grudge resides.

And those who are themselves the perpetrators of discord or offence may well find that one day, if they have not already made peace with those whom they have offended, will find that their deeds, return to haunt them.

That was certainly the case for Joseph's brothers. With Jacob's death, Joseph could well have taken revenge on his brothers for the pain inflicted by them on him self - however much he might have deserved their treatment of him.

There may well be things in our own lives, where there is a need for us to be reconciled, as was one of the messages, contained in last week's Gospel.

And there is no time like the present, to set things right, before it is too late to do so.

Fulfilling the prophecy of Joseph, which had led to his downfall, we see the brothers prostrating themselves before Joseph in seeking his forgiveness. For Joseph, the experience of his captivity and slavery had been seen by him, as part of God's plan, for him. 'God intended it for good' is his response. Few people today can perhaps respond to the awful things, which happen to themselves or those around them so charitably. And I am sure that God understands how difficult, if not impossible, even those of us who profess the Christian faith, would find it to forgive those responsible for events affecting our own, and our families lives.

But nevertheless, there are occasions, which others can testify to, where good has come out of evil in a strange and remarkable way, as with Joseph.

And many of the saints of the church in past years could not have dreamt how their lives, forfeited for their faith in Jesus Christ, have subsequently produced a rich harvest.

As Tertullian, the first major figure in Latin theology is quoted as saying – ‘The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.’

So, in our Gospel reading today – we are challenged by the measure of God’s unlimited forgiveness, and invited to consider our own measure of forgiveness, to those who offend us. In our Old Testament reading - we are to consider how in some circumstances good can emanate from evil. And ponder how we can perhaps respond positively to it ourselves, by offering unlimited forgiveness.

In sharing our lives with each other, whether in the context of our own family, or the church family, we need to learn to live together. And that is the message of Paul’s message to the Church in Rome in today’s New Testament reading.

‘Within any church, Paul says, there will be all sorts of people, to whom different things will have greater importance than for others. In all these matters of

conscience never judge who is right or wrong, better or worse, but, respect each others sincerity.’

As members of the ‘Body of Christ’ we will all as individuals, have our own agenda to work to.

For some, the importance and maintenance of the building will be all important, while for others, a deeper prayer life will top their agenda. But we all know, that if we all met here week by week and prayed like mad, when repairs are required to the roof, it will still leak. But we can certainly pray that this community of Cobham, will respond generously to our appeals for help when and if required, as they have in the past.

Putting stumbling blocks in the way of those seeking to make the Christian Faith part of their lives is not what the church is about. And it is certainly not part of our vision statement – quite the reverse.

For ‘We seek to be a Christian Community in which all can come to know and accept God’s love for them and reflect that love wherever they are.’

Each one of us will have to account to God on the day of judgement, for the stewardship of our own life.

But like the unjust Steward we can find that it is our own actions, which consign us to a prison-like existence. If we cannot learn to forgive, we may well imprison ourselves in bitterness, violence, jealousy and pride. Our souls and bodies will waste away, and we will be chained by our own unwillingness to forgive.

Like that picture of Jesus called 'The Light of the World', by Holman Hunt, where the handle to unlock the door is on the inside, those who find themselves imprisoned by their own unwillingness to forgive others, are the only ones who have the key to extricate themselves from the prison of their own making.

But note in our second reading Paul does not distinguish various groups by race or tradition.

He does not say that some of you are Gentiles or some of you are Jews. It is easy to apportion blame or responsibility to a particular race or tradition where

those who have committed some offence emanate from - tarring so to speak all with the same brush. That will only cause alienation of all. And worse, for where a nation was once divided within itself, it will often unite against those who have brutally oppressed its people – just reflect upon the situation in the Middle East at this time.

As we seek to unite the church of God, it is easy perhaps, for some to disparage other Christian or even Faith traditions, because we do not approve or accept the way that they do things.

It was Peter who asked the question in the Gospel reading today. And when we think of that first Good Friday, we remember not only Peter, but also Judas. Judas betrayed Jesus to the authorities, helped them to arrest him, and saw his leader put through an illegal trial. Peter denied he knew Jesus, three times.

Both within a short time realised what they had done, and what a mess they had made of that relationship with Jesus.

Judas took his own life, whereas Peter found his, by picking up the pieces and starting afresh.

Peter, received Jesus' forgiveness, and was given the task of leading Jesus' followers on the next stage of their discipleship.

If only Judas had had the courage to ask for forgiveness – I am sure that he also would have received that same forgiveness. For this time, it would not have been Judas holding out his hands to embrace Jesus, but Jesus reaching out, like the father in the parable of the 'Prodigal Son', to embrace the wayward son. As Psalm 103 set for today reminds us – ***'The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness. He will not always accuse us, nor will he keep his anger for, ever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our wickedness.'***

Peter received Jesus' answer to his question, and that answer is the same for us here today, as it was 2000 years ago. 'Lord how often should I forgive?'

Jesus has spoken, we have his answer.
Where he has led we are called to follow.

Peter Vickers