

A Proper 19

Place: St Mary's
Ps103

Theme: Forgiveness
18.21-35

17th Sept 17

Gen 50.15-21,

Rm 14.1-12, Mtt

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- ◆ Every time we meet together to worship we pray 'Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.' Forgiveness is a central theme in Jesus parables. When Jesus dies on the cross he prays 'Father Forgive them'. Forgiveness is central to Jesus teaching, but what does it mean to forgive?
- ◆ This is a much more complex question that it appears. One of the key tasks for us as disciples of Christ is to work out what it means to forgive and to be forgiven. There are several things that it doesn't mean and our readings today give us some important clues to understanding the mystery of forgiveness.
- ◆ So let's start with what it doesn't mean to forgive?
- ◆ 'I forgive you' does not mean 'It doesn't matter?' Sometimes we feel guilty about things when we don't need to and then being told 'It doesn't matter' is helpful, but that is not the same as forgiveness.
- ◆ 'I forgive you' also does not mean 'It is forgotten.' Forgiveness takes the past seriously, it doesn't pretend something bad hasn't happened. The best representation of this is the

wounds on the body of the risen Christ. When Jesus is raised from the dead it doesn't wipe out what happened on Good Friday. Part of what forgiveness does is give us a better understanding of who we are and our impact on the world, for good and bad.

- ◆ Thirdly 'I forgive you' does not mean 'You can do it again if you like.' Forgiveness changes things; it doesn't allow for the perpetuation of abuse and sin.
- ◆ If we want to understand what forgiveness is, the cross is the first place to look. If we think about Jesus dying on the cross, when he says 'Father forgive them he does not mean any of those things. Rather the resurrection is the embodiment of Jesus and God's forgiveness of us. A good test for our understanding of forgiveness is to apply it to the cross. If it doesn't make sense in that context then we have yet to understand what it means to forgive.
- ◆ Humanity crucifies Christ and in doing so tries to destroy the only thing that can give us true hope and healing. When Jesus is raised from the dead we are saved from our sins, from our mistakes and crimes, from the predicament we have got ourselves into. The crucifixion reveals who we are and what sort of world we live in. The crucifixion both judges and redeems the world.

- ◆ Forgiveness takes sin seriously and so it is also a judgement, but a very different kind of judgement to what we are used to. Human judgement condemns, divine judgement forgives and gives new life.
- ◆ We like to try and excuse ourselves and say our sins are not as bad as other peoples. We would much rather point out the folly and errors of other people that recognise we are all in the same boat. That is what Paul and Jesus are both talking about in our readings today. We should try our best to live with integrity, but have the humility to recognise that we all get it wrong from time to time. This is a really important step in being able both to forgive and be forgiven. Forgiveness is about seeking the truth in a situation and recognising that our understanding is ourselves. Forgiveness leads us deeper into the truth and so closed to God.
- ◆ In the reading from Genesis, Joseph brothers, who if you remember sold him into slavery and pretended to their father that he had been eaten by a wild beast, say something very interesting when they are finally reunited with their brother. They say ‘Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your Father.’ When they ask Joseph to forgive them they remind him that they share the same father and the same God. They had broken the bonds between them when they sold him into slavery.

Now they are reminding Joseph of those bonds. They know that forgiveness is not just about the two parties directly involved in a situation, but about the wider community and God. That is why Jesus teaches us to pray for forgiveness and to be forgiven. Forgiveness is about restoring broken relationships at the most profound level, it is about restoring our relationship with God as well as one another.

- ◆ The tables have turned in Genesis and Joseph could choose to revenge himself on his brothers. He has the power to send them to prison or to sell them as slaves. Instead of punishing them he chooses to be kind and generous to them. He chooses to forgive. Our Psalm also tells us that God is full of compassion and mercy.
- ◆ Forgiveness is something that springs from generosity and compassion. It is a gift. We need to pray for it because we will only be able to forgive others when we fully understand that we are forgiven, that God's love for us is so great that he does not choose to punish us for our sins, but to forgive us and give us new life and help us into a new relationship with him and one another.
- ◆ Forgiveness is so powerful because it helps us to understand the world more fully. The more we can recognise the depth of our debt to God and God's abundant love and generosity towards us, the more we understand how limited and foolish

we are, the more we will be able to love and forgive our limited and foolish neighbours, because we will see that they like us are only human and love, compassion and mercy will grow within us.