

SETTLING ACCOUNTS- St Matthew Chapter 18:23-35

The parable which is contained in today's Gospel centres on the theme of forgiveness. In the preceding verses which have not been read to us, Peter has asked Jesus how many times he should forgive his brother when he sins against him. And Jesus has replied 'seventy times seven' or an infinite number of times, as God forgives us. Clearly, Jesus thinks the question so crucial to life that he tells the parable of the king settling accounts with his servants. Peter's request for a fixed number may seem surprising to us but Jesus' answer is actually more surprising. Peter, as a Jew, has been brought up with the idea of repaying like for like, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth and with the specific requirements of the Mosaic Law. This traditional law is amply illustrated in the events in present-day Israel and Palestine, where revenge attacks and bombings of settlements and innocent people bear witness to the traditions of Jews and Muslims alike. They were and are accepted as normal, a life for a life, in the Sharia, though mercy or forgiveness can also be exercised. The hopelessness and deadlock created by adopting such a policy is also clear for all to see in the Middle East, though I do not wish to appear to offer a naïve and simplistic solution to an immensely complicated and multi-faceted problem involving all the countries of the region. In terms, then, of the tradition Christ's answer is completely radical and totally against anything that has been adopted hitherto. No, you must forgive. You must not hit back. But equally important is the stress put on the necessity for forgiveness in the last verse. "So also my heavenly father will do to you i.e. deliver you to the jailers, if you do not forgive your brother from the heart."

"Forgiveness from the heart' or genuine forgiveness is the key phrase here. I remember some years ago Fr Gregory Woolfenden preaching on this text and being a 'scouser' or Liverpudlian like myself from the same area he commented on how Jesus's concept of forgiveness was totally different from what often takes place in his home town where after a disagreement both sides often bury the hatchet as we say but mark the spot.

Now we know the importance of the act of forgiveness from our Orthodox Tradition. It stands at the gateway to the Great Fast and it is the key to all repentance and inner freedom. In modern psychological terms we might paraphrase the above "so also you will imprison yourself in your spirit, never find rest or peace within and damage yourself inwardly if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." Whatever tragedy, wrongdoing and insult have befallen us justly or, as in many cases, unjustly, the only way forward is to embark on the long hard process of forgiving. Now each of us knows from his own experience what a monumentally huge spiritual task that is. It may take a lifetime. involve many different stages and include many defeats but if we are Christians we have no choice in the matter. It is bound up with our forgiveness. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us". It is also closely tied up with the act of forgetting and with the process of forgiving ourselves. We should also remember that it is a gift from God. It cannot be done simply in our own strength. It requires understanding and enlightenment to see through the dark veil of anger and bitterness, of being deeply wounded in a way we cannot help or resist in our own strength, into the freedom of forgiving and being forgiven. We have to pray hard for it. It is also inextricably bound up with praying for our enemies, which we are enjoined to do by Our Lord, who did it himself in the agony of the Cross. "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

We know too from our experience that sometimes we can forgive but not forget. It may take

a long time to wipe trauma from our memory, so deep is its mark. And certainly, an experience of being hurt or offended or wounded gives us an earthly knowledge which we need, in order to become more human, wise and mature. But the experience can have such a destructive effect on us and the process of forgetting is something which we must strive towards to make the forgiving more effective and the process of healing in ourselves more complete. I remember Metropolitan Anthony telling me many years ago that it had taken him 40 years to come to terms with the events he had experienced in his early life: exile from Russia, loss of all the family possessions, homelessness, wandering in several countries, parental separation and divorce. After all we are told in scripture that our sins are wiped away, what was scarlet will be as white as snow; "I will remember their sins no more." Again this seems an impossible task, which we are asked to fulfil. We and the world deeply wound God again and again with our forgetfulness of Him by the way we live and yet He responds in love. We are asked to do no less than the same and by entering into God's suffering to join Him in love and forgiveness for the world like the Mother of God. "And a sword will pierce your own heart also" is the promise made to her in the temple.

I have alluded to the act of forgiving ourselves, which often we find so difficult for many reasons. The cry "Why have you fashioned me thus" quoted by St Paul from Isaiah reappears in different forms when we are older and wiser but ultimately ignores the reality of our sinful selves. Low self-esteem is a common psychological affliction which we often read about and witness in ourselves and others these days. It frequently leads to addictions of both a mild and serious nature. Those who treat it successfully say that progress is made when the person begins to accept and love him or herself and extend that same love to others as a result of the freedom which he or she has personally experienced. This also fails to take into account faithfulness and love of God. "To will and to work in us for his good pleasure", as it says in scripture. Or in simple language to transfigure us despite what we are.

In the parable also, the difference in the debts is most significant. The servant owes the king ten thousand talents, a huge amount, and is released from the debt. The servant, however, is only owed a trifling sum of a few denarii but is prepared to throttle his fellow servant and throw him into prison. The difference in the amounts is to make us aware of the enormous debt we owe to God. It points to our lack of love and gratitude towards Him and shows us the magnitude of God's forgiveness and mercy summed up in the phrase of the Great Doxology "Thou who takest away the sins of the world, receive our prayer". By comparison the monumental task which we are called to embark upon of forgiving others and praying actively for our enemies is in reality only trifling in the divine scale of things, according to what Christ is saying.

"The beginning is half of the work" is an ancient Roman phrase. If we can be given the spiritual insight to see this, we will certainly be starting on the path towards forgiveness and the inner healing of ourselves and each other. May God grant us all something of that grace which is part of the life and work of the Kingdom of which Christ spoke. Amen.

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