

MUTUAL FORGIVENESS Matt. 18: 23-35

Today's Gospel follows on directly from St Peter's question to Christ concerning the number of times he should forgive his brother. St Peter offers the perfect number seven as a possible solution to the problem. The Lord dismisses it forcefully as woefully inadequate and raises the stakes limitlessly to seventy times seven. And then he goes on to relate the parable of the king settling accounts with his servants and ends with the stern warning that we shall be delivered to the jailers till we pay all our debts unless we forgive our brother from the heart.

Now this commandment falls into the category of those which are seemingly unattainable for man, unless we are given the strength of the Holy Spirit. It is akin to sayings like "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," or as we have just heard at the little entrance, "Blessed are you when men shall revile you and persecute you and say all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake, rejoice and be exceeding glad for great is your reward in heaven." In the Lord's prayer this idea is echoed: "And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." It is assumed to be something we do automatically as Christians because forgiveness of others is inextricably bound up with our desire to be forgiven by God and our fellow man. And let us be realistic about this, not piously sentimental: it reaches the dizzy heights of asking the Jewish nation to forgive the Nazis, or of war camp victims to forgive the Japanese officers who starved and brutally tortured them, not to speak of the millions of victims of Soviet oppression who received similar treatment in camps, mental hospitals and prisons throughout Russia. This apparently unattainable goal is set as a commandment before us not as an option since the king has forgiven his servants their debts. Jesus dies on the Cross with the words, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do". His disciple the Protodeacon Stephen cries aloud at his death by stoning, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And only comparatively recently we see a country's president released after more than twenty years imprisonment on an offshore island where he was regularly beaten and abused with not only a marked absence of anger and a desire for revenge but a real sense of having gratefully received his cross from God and of having benefited from the experience inwardly. *and who can say that N.M. is not one of the most enlightened, visionary and philanthropic leaders of the last century.*

Most of us, however, are not immediately capable of this simple forgiveness since it entails huge spiritual battles in our souls. For many of us we can only begin, with the realisation that we must forgive but cannot. But this is a huge first step and if we can make even such a small beginning we know that God will come far towards us to help like the Father in the parable of the Prodigal Son. St Paul talks about this in another context, giving money, but how much more meaningful in a spiritual one. "If the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a man has, not according to what he has not." Another ancient saying is that "the beginning is half of the deed". But why must we begin this apparently impossible task. It all has to do with inner freedom and not being attached or held down by anything in life. It ultimately concerns ourselves and not others, our own spiritual or ascetic struggle since the only enemy is within not without. How hard it is to rid ourselves of these demons, these memories which afflict us and ultimately ruin our lives. It is not surprising that the prayers to the Mother of God ask for deliverance 'from cruel recollections and undertakings'.

On the way to centring this struggle upon ourselves we might start practically with three persons we have to forgive: God, other people and ourselves. And as we all know well we

probably need to make a special sub-category in the second group for the Bishop, priests and other members of the parish. The forgiveness of God arises from the fact of lack of acceptance of what we are, where we are and who we are. One of the three may predominate according to age. It echoes the famous phrase quoted from St Paul citing the Old Testament prophet, "why have you fashioned me thus?" It often stems from comparison with others and rails at God for not creating us according to our ideals or wishes. In members of the Church it can often be extremely deep-rooted and skilfully disguised through lack of recognition or honesty with ourselves, especially where there has been great suffering, perhaps at the hands of members of the Church. It needs the healing power of the Holy Spirit and the discernment of a confessor or spiritual father to root it out.

The forgiveness of ourselves is closely connected with the fact that we do not see that we are unique in God's eyes and loved with an unimaginable love by Christ himself. It ignores the unique treasures that lie within us, already revealed and yet to be revealed. It involves experiences of personal failure, which we cannot accept, or ideas of our achievements, which we wrongly attribute to our own making. Its root is pride. There is a very interesting story in the (recent) biography of Bishop Anthony where he consulted his spiritual father on the question of an exam he was about to take which would have placed him on the first rungs of the ladder to Professor of Medicine. He knew he could make a very good attempt at coming out top. His spiritual father to his astonishment told him to do badly deliberately. He was shocked and went away to think about his advice. Eventually he threw it away and came near the bottom of the list of candidates. It was not that he could not have done well. Rather it was about vanity and having a true knowledge of oneself based on the facts. Failure to forgive ourselves is often called 'low esteem' by present day psychologists and must be the opposite of an inflated idea of ourselves or the cutthroat, ruthless ambition which we are urged to develop. True knowledge of ourselves and God is very closely intertwined.

To forgive others is a highly difficult, complex and lengthy process which we need to practise regularly as a spiritual discipline. It involves going through the gallery of people who have hurt us to one degree or another throughout our lives and trying to forgive as far as we are able. Praying for those people will accelerate the process. Again it needs to be ruthlessly practical. Once bitten, twice shy is a salutary reminder to keep away from certain places and people despite forgiving them like the streets I walked through on the way back home from school as a child where unless you followed in the shadow of older boys you would be physically attacked. Forgiveness needs to be tempered with wisdom, especially in the family where despite inner forgiveness, rapprochement or the healing of a breach can only be achieved by both sides wishing to come together. Prayer is all important here.

To be grossly wronged and innocently persecuted is unfortunately part of what we accept when we agree to follow in the steps of our Saviour. He after all is the "blameless lamb led to the slaughter". The scale of the task is constant and immense but the goal is selfless and glorious as the reported words of a martyred Russian priest clearly illustrate: 'There will come a day when the martyr will be able to stand before the throne of God in defence of his persecutors and say, 'Lord, I have forgiven in thy name and by thy example. Thou hast no claim against them any more.'" May God grant us all this kind of vision of the power of forgiveness. Amen