

Sermon for 17.9.17

Forgiveness. A simple word yet it speaks about a concept that is very complex. Forgiveness is foundational in our Christian faith, and it the message in the readings today.

In the Eucharistic service we pray for forgiveness and absolution by the priest is given and then we are ready and enabled to partake in the Holy Communion.

We pray that we will be granted forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer – and that in turn we give it to our fellow humans.

Why is it so important to us?

Well the Christian faith is all about living life to the fullest in Christ. Living life in inner maturity and freedom. When we harbour un-forgiveness, life to the fullness is not possible, for there within, we will find some form of resentment that works for our ill rather than our well - being.

Forgiveness from the heart as Jesus commands in the gospel reading is what heals us and releases us into our true humanity in Christ.

Rowan Williams explores this idea a little further. He says that when we forgive each other we actually nourish one another's humanity, for when we are hurt or offended we tend to withdraw and reinforce the walls that keep us in the confines of the private self. We treat our own humanity as a possession rather than a gift from God.

The unforgiven and the unforgiving, therefore cannot see that the other one is actually part of God's work. To forgive and to be forgiven is to allow yourself to be upheld as a creature of God by those whom you may least want to receive as signs of God's gift. To deny the possibilities of forgiveness would be to say that there are those I have no need of, because they have offended me or because they have refused to extend a hand to me.

When we do that we deny theirs and our own humanity in the image of God.¹

Well that sounds all pretty convincing!

Why not just do it then!

Well on one hand forgiveness is simple, but on the other, it deals with people's emotions – usually driven or affected by deep hurts, judgements, and sometimes fear of change.

The way to move from un-forgiveness to forgiveness is a process, a journey with God and sometimes also with a trusted friend.

Generally it doesn't happen in the blink of an eye.

¹ Rowan Williams <https://jasongoroncy.com/2010/07/23/rowan-williams-on-forgiveness-and-some-other-stuff/>

The Old Testament reading about Joseph forgiving his brothers for the extreme hurt and injury they had done to him is a good example of this.

The brothers ultimately sought Joseph's forgiveness at the end of a journey that went back and forth from famine to provision- from one place to another - until it ultimately arrived at its destination which was a life gained for both the forgiven and the forgiver, rich with provision.

In the process Joseph had been healed and had moved from the hardness of heart to a softness of compassion, acceptance and love.

As the reading tells us, many tears fell that day when forgiveness was sought, given and received. Bridges were built between Joseph and his brothers and walls that kept them isolated from each other, were torn down.

The gospel passage points to another factor about forgiveness.

Thanks to Peter we hear that it is not quantifiable – it should be limitless, as is God's. Jesus illustrates this with a parable. The servant has been granted forgiveness and shown mercy by God (the king) but this generosity of forgiveness did not flow out from him to his own debtors.

The point of the parable is that human forgiveness, our attaining the capacity to forgive, is rooted in divine forgiveness, in our being forgiven by God.

God's forgiveness is unlimited, given as often as we need and ask for it.

We recall here that beautiful parable of the prodigal son when the wayward son returns home repentant and seeking forgiveness and how the father's arms are outstretched ready to embrace in unconditional love.

To forgive is clearly the mark of a humanity touched by God – free from anxiety about identity and safety, free to reach out into what is other, as God does in Jesus Christ.

As Paul reminds the Romans the way we live always has influence or impacts upon others.

Showing mercy, merciful living is in the first place the result of an inner conversion, of better reflecting the God in whose image we are created.

The surprising forgiveness of God in showing us mercy when we expect judgement invites us live in the joy and freedom of our true humanity and to offer the same forgiveness to others.

The Lord be with you.