

## Homily notes:

13th September - 24th Sunday in OT Year A 2020

I'm sure none of us can but be concerned about so much that is going on around the world. There seems to be ferment across the globe; certainly times are not normal, and are unlikely to be so for quite some long time.

Ever recall Pope Francis and his whole 'change of era.' Leaping off the page are the opening words of today's first reading; resentment, anger and vengeance, which illustrate, as ever, nothing is new under the sun, it is all there in the Scriptures.

Ecclesiasticus speaks of nursing anger and cherishing resentment and exacting vengeance; all suggesting doing so is like a tinderbox inside just bursting to get out. And in many and various ways we see it happening. The writer clearly grasped that since through our human frailty, we all constantly sin in God's sight, we simply have no right to ask forgiveness from God when we will not forgive others. The shortness and insecurity of our mortal life should be a reminder of the folly of clinging to our pride and self-righteousness. He says remember 'the Last Things and stop hating. Remember dissolution and death, and live by the commandments. Do not bear your neighbour ill-will.

Forgiveness is hard. Someone has even written 'forgiveness is like death', because it means giving the death blow to our pride, and even sometimes to our instinct for self-preservation. C.S. Lewis was right when he said 'Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive.' Taught by our Lord we pray 'Forgive us our trespasses and we forgive those who trespass against us.'

When Peter asked Jesus how often he should forgive, proposing the generous offer of as many as seven times, he was really trying to set a limit – to see how few times he could forgive and get away with it. Jesus responded and shows by his combination of seven and seventy: numbers which symbolised completeness that forgiveness must be without limit. Translations of the numbers vary, from ours which says seventy-seven times, or seventy times seven; that is 490. Limitless.

Again we turn to C.S. Lewis who explained ‘We forgive, we mortify our resentment; a week later some chain of thought carries us back to the original offence and we discover the old resentment blazing away as if nothing had been done about it at all.’

As often as the sense of grievance rises hot and strong within us, Jesus challenges us to forgive. And this forgiving is not so much about forgetting as about remembering without bitterness or acrimony or vengeance in our hearts.

The alternative to forgiveness is to cling on to our hurt, nurse our anger and cherish our resentment. Those three may feel the natural, even the right response when someone has seriously wronged or hurt us.

But ultimately the only people we punish by refusing to let go of those feelings and attitudes are ourselves. And the cost to this way is our freedom and robs our life of peace. We may feel that by holding on to our anger and resentment, we somehow have a hold over the person or persons who have hurt us, perhaps even that we are punishing them: but the reverse is true –we are the ones who are ensnared. Lack of forgiveness weighs us down and traps us. Jesus illustrates why Christians may not set limits to forgiveness by his parable of the merciless steward. This parable puts in story form the second petition in the Lord’s Prayer, ‘Forgive us, as we forgive.’ In the story there is an interchange between the players.

A problem for us can occur when someone seriously offends us, and doesn’t or will not ask for forgiveness. In St Luke’s version he mentions that the one who wrongs says sorry, even if it is seven times. Things do need sorting out, hence the parable. No one says it is easy. The cost for Jesus was his life on the cross as he prayed ‘forgive them, for they know not what they do.’

I’m ever mindful of Corrie Ten Boom, imprisoned in Ravenbruck Concentration Camp, where her sister died. Corrie survived and after the war spent a lot of time speaking about forgiveness and reconciliation. Much of it in Germany, but also here. One day after her talk a man went to shake her hand and thank her for her talk and she froze as she realised in horror that she recognised him as a former SS guard from Ravensbruck. Initially she felt incapable of taking his hand and responding, but she

records 'as I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while in my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me. And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that this world's healing hinges, but on God's.

As our Psalm has it, The Lord is compassion and love, slow to anger and rich in mercy.