

Homily (notes) from Canon Philip Dyson
17th September 2023 - 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings (Year A): 1st: Ecclesiasticus 27:33-28:9. 2nd: Romans 14:7-9. Gospel: Matthew 18:21-35.

In the words of Alexander Pope ‘to err is human, to forgive is divine.’ When Peter asked Jesus how often he must forgive the person who wrongs him, he probably thought he was being very generous in suggesting seven times as a possible answer. Perhaps he even expected praise: at last Jesus would recognise that Peter was now on the right track. He had finally grasped that God’s ways are more abundant than human ways, that God wants us to go that bit further, forgiving more than just once or twice.

The Rabbis suggested three times. We can probably imagine Peter’s shocked expression as he heard Jesus’ reply - Seventy-seven times: some manuscripts have seventy times seven.

Jesus here contrasts the behaviour expected of his disciples with the boundless vengeance of Lamech in Genesis 4: 24 when he says ‘seven-fold vengeance for Cain: but seventy-seven-fold for Lamech. Lamech threatens all and sundry with his policy to wreak unmitigated revenge on any foe.

Moses represents a great breakthrough in setting the standard of no more than equal vengeance: ‘an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.’

While that standard was a great advance in civil relationships, it did not go far enough for Jesus, who, as we know in the Sermon of the Mount says: ‘Love your enemies; pray for those who persecute you.’

The wheel of thought has turned full circle from the vengeance of Lamech. Primitive lust for revenge has been replaced by divine compassion. Divine love will not be stopped by any obstacle, it will not be poisoned by any infection of hatred.

Jesus shows, by his combination of ‘seven’ and ‘seventy’ – the numbers which symbolised completeness – that forgiveness must be without limit.

How well Peter absorbed the message may be seen in these noble words from his First Letter (1 Pet: 3:9,13-14) ‘Never pay back one wrong with another, or any angry word with another one; instead pay back with a blessing. No one can hurt you if you are determined to do only what is right; if you do have to suffer for being good, you will count it a blessing.’

The alternative to forgiveness is to cling to our hurt. Both the 1st reading, and Jesus’ parable speak of the danger of being trapped in nursing anger and cherishing resentment, for the great truth is that they fester away inside us, doing us no good at all.

Anger, resentment, and revenge 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 is ourselves. If we harbour anger, hatred, resentment, then we too have a problem.

We are infected by their poison.

Now there are two wrongs, a situation that rarely makes a right. In last Sunday’s gospel Jesus does say try and sort things out. Sometimes we know for whatever reason that is not possible, as it maybe they won’t admit to their wrong, or would never want to sort it out or say sorry. Some people are evil. Then all we can do is pray for them.

In the parable Jesus wanted to explain not merely *how often* we must forgive, but also *why* we must do so. Our reason for showing mercy and forgiveness time and time again is because that is how God forgives us.

St Paul in the 2nd reading helps deepen this understanding: because we belong to the Lord and live under Christ’s reign; his forgiveness and reconciliation will have an impact in our lives, and through us, on the lives of other people.

We pray daily ‘forgive us, as we forgive’, and throw ourselves on the Psalm response of today: “The Lord is compassion and love, slow to anger and rich in mercy.”

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