

Reflection

For Sunday 13th September
Trinity 14

By Rosamund Seal



A Reflection based on Gen 50.15-21; psalm 103.8-13, Rom 14.1-12; Matt 18.21-35

Forgiveness – what a huge topic, what a painful topic. Where, where do we begin, with this powerful set of collects and readings:

Joseph's brothers remembering the awful crime they committed against him when they sold him into slavery as a young man and fearing his retribution.

Those wonderful words from Ps103 singing of the Lord who forgives our sins, who redeems us, a Lord who is full of compassion and mercy. What loving parent or grandparent has not played with their child or grandchild that wonderful game of 'How much do I love you?' – as high as the sky, as far as the moon, to the moon and back, to the end of the universe and back a trillion times over. Well it was the psalmist who invented that game – *'For as the heavens are high above the earth, so is his mercy great upon those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our sins from us.'*

The continuation of Paul's letter to the Romans instructing the church on how to be a Christian community. *'Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? – for in the end 'each of us will be accountable to God'*

And then Jesus' parable following on from last week's instructions about how to solve our disagreements. A harsh parable in many ways, commonly called the parable of the unforgiving servant. The servant who begs forgiveness of his outrageous 10 thousand talent debt from his master, who received forgiveness and mercy and then promptly goes out and, completely without mercy, throws into prison a fellow servant who owes a mere 100 denarii.

The outrage comes from his colleagues – the other slaves – who recognise and are aggrieved by, his injustice, and out of empathy with the imprisoned slave, report the injustice to the master.

'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.' If we can't forgive others it is unlikely we will be able to experience forgiveness ourselves. Not that God withholds his forgiveness, but that we fail to be able to receive it.

The servant who was forgiven so much was not actually aware of what he had received – he just thought that a bit of pleading and obsequiousness had let him off the hook and he probably felt relieved but did not feel grateful – he was not truly aware of the magnitude of the mercy he had received and so could not see his way to sharing that with another.

The more I talk about forgiveness with individuals who have faced great hurt, the more I have come to discover that to forgive another is as much about finding healing for oneself. If we cannot forgive those who hurt us, the only long term thing that happens is that we become bitter; we become consumed by the inability to forgive, eaten up with a hurt that we cannot channel – unless we channel it in revenge – and we all know where that is likely to lead us. And we human beings are deeply programmed for revenge.

However we have to acknowledge that the gospel imperative is for us to fight that impulse and respond with that phrase from Romans (which we heard a few weeks ago) echoing it in our minds

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'Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.'

It is hard, very hard, it goes against our natural instincts but we need to accept the imperative that the only way evil can be overcome is by goodness. In the end for Joseph's family, despite the years they had spent apart, despite all the pain, grief and guilt that they had caused each other, there was at last a final peace. And when Joseph in his magnanimity says: *'Even though you intended to do harm to me – God intended it for good'* I don't think that this means that it was God's plan that Joseph would be sold into slavery, but that, given that it had happened, the only way for Joseph to respond was to try to follow the way of God and remain faithful to him and hope that ultimately His will might be fulfilled through the many trials that he suffered. If Joseph had gone for revenge there would have been no peace for this family, no reconciliation, and note too that it did not happen in his father's lifetime, no poor bereaved Jacob was now dead, and it seems that it was only after his death that the brothers realised that they needed to finally try and make peace with Joseph for the sake of the future of the family.

Forgiveness is hard work – it does not just happen, it is rarely immediate, it is something that has to be slowly and painfully worked through. It means facing our fears and hearing the truth and accepting any responsibility which is ours. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission that did so much work in South Africa led by the indomitable Desmond Tutu is proof that it can be done even in cases of national atrocity. And note too, that there can be no Reconciliation without Truth – the truth needs to be faced and accepted for what it is. The unforgiving servant could not forgive the other because he had not faced the truth of what his master had done for him.

I remember watching once, a very powerful video clip of a woman who was brutally abused, both, physically, sexually and emotionally from the age of 6 until she left for university at the age of 17 at Smyllum Park orphanage in Lanarkshire. It was painful to listen to this calm, educated woman talking, almost dispassionately but with great clarity, about what had happened to her during her childhood at the hands of the catholic nuns who ran the orphanage.

That woman is now a psychiatrist working with other abused people – trying to help them make sense of what has happened to them and..... to use her experience of evil as a force for good,

I pray that each of us may have the courage to do the same