

Sunday Sermon - 13.09.20

Delivered by Gemma Dashwood at St Paul's

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen

As many of you know, part of my Formation Programme towards Priesthood involves me getting marked on my sermons. My Supervising Priest has informed me that my mark will be based on the number of people who are still reading their Bailiwick while I speak. So if, as a favour to me, you can put your Bailiwicks down for a few minutes, I'll be very grateful!

I'm at work in the Intensive Care Unit. It's early hours of Sunday morning – 3am, and I sit down with a family and I tell them the worst news possible – their son has been killed in an accident where he was hit whist on his bike by a drunk driver. Not only have I just handed that family the heaviest of grief burdens, but this would seem a situation where forgiveness of that drunk driver was well nigh impossible. How on earth can we usefully apply today's Gospel reading to that situation?

I will be honest with you – I think Jesus' requirement for us to forgive others can be a challenging one sometimes. When you or someone you care about has been hurt, or let down, or someone has acted irresponsibly to your detriment, forgiving them can be really really hard. I can totally understand why the disciples were hoping Jesus would give them a limit to the number of times they needed to forgive those that wronged them. After seven times, that's it, you are allowed to hold a grudge for ever. But no, Jesus demands more – we have to keep forgiving, as many times as it takes.

Perhaps the disciples were troubled by the same thing that I worry about with the assurance of forgiveness – if people know that whatever they do, however bad, they will be forgiven, is that not just giving them a free ticket to behave however they like? That's hardly fair on the people who keep getting hurt is it? I don't think "just keep forgiving them" is a useful response to someone who is serially hurt – for example by their partner, by bullies at school or work, or even for those who have just lost someone close to them due to a preventable accident.

So how do we, as human beings, ever expect to get to a place where we can even think about forgiveness, when the crimes can seem so heinous?

Part of the answer perhaps lies in Paul's letter to the Romans – we need to keep forgiving because we do not have the authority to give judgement. We do not have all the information like God does, we don't know what is going on in other people's hearts. We may have our opinions, and thoughts – God granted us the gift of autonomy after all – but it is what we do with those opinions and thoughts that can make the difference. If we judge someone as not worthy of forgiveness because of our own bias, then it is us that needs forgiveness just as much as them.

Take for example the Uberlingen mid air collision in 2002 – when two planes crashed into each other in the middle of the night sky. The air traffic controller who should have been able to prevent the collision was distracted by something else going on, and only too late noticed the horror that was about to happen. The inquest into the deaths of the 71 people found that there were several factors involved in the tragedy – not all of them the fault of the traffic controller. However, some 18 months after the accident, overcome by grief to the point of insanity, a relative who lost his entire family in the crash stabbed the air traffic controller to death, outside his house, in view of his wife and children. Now I don't suggest for a second that forgiveness on behalf of the grieving relative should have been instant and complete, but if there is no room left for love and compassion in our hearts, it is easy to see how the world can become a very dark and hateful place. That is not the world that Jesus died for.

The other point that Jesus makes in his parable of the servant is that we all need forgiveness – and I suggest we would each need forgiveness way more than 77 times. If we refuse to forgive others, then we must be prepared for our mistakes to also remain unforgiven. I suspect our burdens would become intolerable fairly quickly.

So how on earth do we take an example like my bereaved family at work or the relative who lost their family in the plane crash and help them get to a place where forgiveness is even a remote possibility? It seems such an impossible task at the outset.

Something that may be helpful is to remember that forgiveness is a two way street. Whether we are at fault or not, by holding a grudge, we are only hurting ourselves. It takes strength to shake the hand of our enemy but if both parties are willing to try, something very special can come out of sitting down together and finding a way to reach peace. We don't have to ever agree with each other, but finding forgiveness in our hearts will release us just as much as our enemy.

As Christians, we have been charged by Jesus to forgive. His, of course, is the ultimate example – dying on the cross he offers up to God the words "Forgive them, Lord, they know not what they do". And in return for forgiving others, we have been promised that we too will be forgiven. This is how we set ourselves apart. This is how we can show the world how our faith can make life worthwhile and rewarding.

I want to finish with a poem I discovered earlier this year by the poet Hafiz, written in the 14th century. It illustrates just how wonderful we can make the world if we can find forgiveness where it is needed and love unconditionally. I challenge us all to be that light of Christ



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Even
After
All this time
The sun never says
To the earth
"You owe me"
Look
What happens
With a love like that
It lights the
Whole
Sky

Amen

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