

## Reflection for Pentecost 15 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

Jesus said, *“So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister\* from your heart.”* Those are the concluding words of the gospel for Pentecost 15, a passage that takes a careful look at the question of forgiveness. In doing so it reminds us that forgiveness is not just a one-off event (*I forgive you and that is it*) but is also an ongoing process. To put it another way, repentance and forgiveness must be followed by a change of attitude, a change that extends beyond ourselves towards others.

In the gospel, Peter asks Jesus a question *“Lord, if another member of the church sins against me how often should I forgive them? Up to seven times?”*

Reflect on the question for a moment. If somebody keeps on doing you wrong how many times do you forgive them before you say enough is enough? How often have you or I been the victim and when do we want to draw the line?

When I was in Canada, one of the small towns I served had a historic grain elevator: an ancient wooden structure, it even appeared on one of the Canadian banknotes. The local community had worked hard to raise a lot of money to restore this elevator and in many ways, it was the symbol of that small prairie town. Then one February night, as a result of an arson attack the elevator was left as a pile of ash. The police caught those who had carried out the attack. Can you imagine how that community felt towards those arrested and later convicted?

Sometimes, in understanding biblical teaching on topics such as forgiveness, it is helpful to use our imagination; placing ourselves into the stories or parables and asking, how would I react? As we do so, we may well begin to see things from a different perspective, and Jesus' explanation to Peter is an example of this.

Jesus tells the story of a king auditing his accounts, establishing who owes him money and how those debts can be settled. A man is brought before him who owes a very large sum, if he worked for his entire life he could never earn enough money to pay off the loan. So what should the king do, especially as the man begs for more time? Pay now, pay bit by bit (if ever), or cancel the debt? What does the King do?

Now place yourself in the shoes of the man who owes so much that he can never pay it back. How might you feel as you stand in front of the king? As the judgment comes it means you are free to rebuild your life without the burden of debt hanging around your neck: joy and thanksgiving well up mingled with disbelief and a sense of gratitude which can never be fully expressed because of its greatness.

Then on your way home, you meet someone who owes you a small amount. What do you do? How do you treat this person and why?

In the story, the man who has been forgiven so much has the man who owes him in comparatively little put in prison until he can pay. Something is so wrong. Why should one be forgiven and not the other? It is in highlighting this discrepancy of action that Jesus shows to Peter the real nature of forgiving.

Each of us is like that man standing before the King, except in reality the King is God. And what we owe is not money: rather, what is credited against us is our sin and self will. And like that man, we too have no way of paying off the debt however hard we may try. We are climbing a mountain we will never reach the top of.

What does God do? Does he condemn us? No through his grace, through his efforts, Jesus writes off our debts. He says to us, you are free, you are forgiven. How does that feel? But also, what difference does that make? How do we react to those who hurt us? Like the man in the story if we are forgiven more than we can hope to pay back should we not in turn forgive those who hurt us comparatively very little?

This is not about ignoring wrong; rather it is about allowing the forgiveness that we have received to touch others. In some ways, the question that man forgiven by the King should have been asking is, why? Why did the king forgive me? The answer is love and compassion - love and compassion that has the power to change everything. The man, though, is so concerned with himself he failed to ask that question and ended up back where he had started.

What Jesus is saying is what you have experienced the love of God – you, too, should be looking to share it.

One writer summing up this section of Matthews gospel has put it like this

*“The nature of forgiveness is a most profound aspect of reconciling grace. Forgiveness is never easy; it is hard. It is the most difficult thing in the universe. Forgiveness means that the forgiving person as the innocent one resolves his own wrath over the sin of the guilty one and lets the guilty one go free. To forgive means that one genuinely loves, and this love can move beyond the issue to the person, and that one cares more about the person than about what he or she has done. Forgiveness liberates. Forgiveness frees the person for the options of living. Our refusal to forgive is a power play that limits the offender, that holds the guilty “under one’s thumb,” or power. But such forgiveness is always in relationship, hence the condition of repentance. It is not a package that one accepts and runs away with. It is only known in reconciliation.*

Put like this, and reflecting on Jesus’ parable about love, forgiveness, and reconciliation, should challenge each of us most profoundly. When I look at what God has done for me, is there someone that I need to forgive?

As you reflect on that question, the opening verses from Psalm 32 seem to encapsulate so much.

Psalm 32:1-2 (GNB)

*Happy are those whose sins are forgiven, whose wrongs are pardoned.*

*Happy is the one whom the LORD does not accuse of doing wrong and who is free from all deceit.*