

# Sunday Homily

## 14<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

13 SEPTEMBER 2020

YEAR A

“Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave,  
as I had mercy on you?”

Matthew 18:33

### Introduction

James read his mother’s letter again. “Your father doesn’t have long to live. He wants to make up with you.” But James seethed at the thought of his father. He remembered his coldness as a parent and his impossibly high standards. Even now his eyes moistened at the memory of punishments suffered at his hand, and belt. James had sought to erase his father’s influence from his life but in reality hatred for his father had affected every major decision he had made. He had declined a place at university knowing that was against his father’s wishes. He chose a wife he knew his father would dislike – the marriage was a disaster. Then there was his decision to stay abroad when all he wanted was to come home. These things were done to get back at his father, but who really suffered?

Martin Luther King said, “Hate is a boomerang that circles back and hurts you.” Forgiveness is important not just for the perpetrator but for the victim, helping them to break away from anger and bitterness which could freeze them in the past and destroy their hope in the future. Today’s Gospel reading is about forgiveness and shows how important it is for Christians to practise it.

### Gospel Teaching

Jesus has been teaching his disciples about how to deal with fellow Christians who sin against them (Matthew 18:15-20). This prompts Peter, keen to impress Jesus, to suggest that he would forgive his brother seven times – a generous act, as rabbis would have limited it to three. Jesus, however, in saying that his disciples should be prepared to forgive seventy-seven times, means that Christian forgiveness should be unlimited.

Imagine the disciples’ reaction – how could unlimited forgiveness be possible? Jesus explains in the parable. The servant who owed ten thousand talents was probably a high official responsible for delivering the taxes from the province he oversaw. He owed the equivalent of millions of pounds, a hopeless debt which could never be repaid. Yet when the servant begged to be given more time, the king was compassionate and went beyond his request, forgiving him the entire debt.

The king expected his generosity to affect this man's behaviour towards others, but instead the servant found someone who owed him three months' wages (a minuscule amount compared with the servant's own debt) and demanded payment.

The key to this parable lies in the king's furious words, "Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" If we truly understand how immeasurable a debt God has forgiven us, we will forgive others the comparably much smaller sins they commit against us.

## Application

This is difficult teaching and there are some common misunderstandings about what forgiveness means in practice which are worth refuting:

To forgive you must also forget. This is not always realistic, especially when serious crimes have been committed. Forgiveness does not necessarily involve forgetting but it does affect how we take those memories into the future, preventing them consuming us with hatred and vindictiveness.

Forgiveness always brings reconciliation. Whilst that is often so, there are times when reconciliation simply isn't a safe or sensible option, as might be the case in abusive relationships, for instance.

Forgiveness involves denying that our hurt matters. We can think that forgiveness involves playing down the significance of what has happened to us. But if forgiveness is to be true and lasting it must involve confronting sin and being honest about our pain. Forgiveness is often a gradual process, one which takes time and for which we may need the help of others. To rush through it by sweeping pain under the carpet can be dangerous. By asking us to forgive, God isn't overlooking the seriousness of sin but asking us to leave any retribution up to him.

Forgiveness is primarily about our feelings. But actually, forgiveness is an act of the will, a choice which affects how we behave. We may well struggle with negative feelings even after forgiving someone, but God is concerned with our willingness to try, not in our instant success, and he will be there to help us.

For Jesus, forgiveness and our participation in it are fundamental signs of the kingdom of God. By practising forgiveness we show that we fully comprehend how much God has loved and forgiven us, and through it we can know the joy of working with him to pass on the grace we have experienced to others.