

Year A Creation 3 Proper 24 17th September 2023

Gen 50:15-21

Rom 14: 1-12

Matt 18: 21-25

Well, they say be careful what you wish for but actually you have to be careful what you pray for. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Well we're good at asking God to forgive us our sins but are we so good at forgiving those who have sinned against us? Don't we find it hard at times and I'm sure we can remember all too well those who have sinned against us.

It starts early in school, hurt feelings, bullying, something's been said that is unkind, someone has been unfair, a teacher might have picked on Esther or Dimitri for doing something that was actually somebody else's fault. We all know that happens at times... name calling, pushing us around, getting us into trouble when actually they're the troublemakers, or have ignored us, shown us up, humiliated us.

We can all remember those occasions and I can certainly remember occasions when it took me a long time to forgive people who'd hurt me badly. But we forget, rather conveniently I think, that we have often done the same to other people. And just as we've found it hard to forgive them for what they've done, they too will find it difficult to forgive us for what we've done. Jesus tells us here we are to forgive 77 times and in another version 70 times seven. These are big numbers, but not that we should stop when we have forgiven someone 490 times or 490 different people even, it's a never-ending process.

Now last night Markie, I and Chris, along with Simon and Carna were at the Usher Hall at the annual Praise Gathering Event and the moment that struck me was with Graham Kendrick who was the star guest. He was singing a new song that he released in June called Jesus of the Scars. It was a very powerful song and it made me think how Jesus had every right to feel unforgiving to what was being done to him – by the Romans, the Jewish authorities and indeed the crowd who got whipped up into saying Crucify him, crucify him. Yet one of his final sayings on the cross was Father, forgive them for they not what they do. A model of forgiveness that is probably beyond our capabilities. As Kendrick wrote, ...as pain runs deep and words cry out for answers, we come to you O Jesus of the scars. It is precisely because we can come to the Jesus of the scars that we can receive forgiveness for what we have done but also to find a way of forgiving what others have done to us.

I think there are two key reasons for forgiving. Annie Lamott, an American writer, describes holding unforgiveness is like drinking rat poison and expecting the rat to die. It doesn't work. All that happens is that we end up getting bitter. And also when we forgive we make room for God's forgiveness to come into us. Jesus makes that very clear in this passage about the servants that as we forgive it is easier for God to forgive. And if we don't forgive

God isn't really that interested in forgiving us for what we have done wrong. So we mustn't forget how much we need forgiveness and how much we need to forgive.

Now I notice how the translation talks of 10,000 bags of gold, I always think of it as 10,000 talents. Now how much money, Esther and Dimitiri, do you think 10,000 talents is? Do you think it's £10,000, 10 million pounds or even more or less? Well I don't think billions cuts it, I don't think trillions cuts it. We're into squillions or gazillions or whatever word you think of. I read somewhere it is the equivalent of 150,000 years earnings. That's a lot of money. Yet the servant in the story wouldn't forgive a tiny amount. The whole point of what Jesus was saying was God had forgiven us the equivalent of 10,000 talents for all that we have done, so no wonder he gets so angry.

The other thing is that it isn't just a question of forgive and forget or even passive acceptance for what's been done. The whole point of forgiveness is to seek reconciliation and resolution. So we need to think about not only those situations where we've been the victim and be willing to offer forgiveness and seek reconciliation but also when we've been the offender and the same principles apply. God is willing to forgive our offences, which far exceed anything done to us, but we need to make room for God's forgiveness by our own willingness to forgive. As one commentator puts it, forgiveness is the beginning – the beginning – of the hard work of building God's kingdom.

Now we are in the season of creation and it did occur to me that there is a lot of anger around at the way we have messed up the world in terms of the environment and we have, but if people hadn't discovered oil, they hadn't discovered coal, they hadn't discovered gas, we would still be living in caves and I'm not sure many of us actually want to go back to that way of life. These things have been discovered – God created them in the first place, so they are for us to use. But clearly we have exploited them in an unhelpful way, that's what's apparent. When they were first discovered no-one realised what the impact was going to be and I think we need to forgive those who did these things in good faith and we now see oil companies, or energy companies, actually looking for ways we can limit, or hopefully even undo, the damage we have done to the environment.

I was reading only yesterday of a really interesting method that one chap in Ireland has come up with for capturing carbon, which is a very complicated technology in theory. Oil companies are looking at ways they can take carbon out of the atmosphere to slow down any increase and store it in the oil wells they have emptied. But there are simpler ways of doing it, according to this man in Ireland. Concrete dust is very good at capturing carbon apparently and is working at spreading concrete dust on agricultural fields and one of the interesting side effects of that is that it makes the soil less acidic and more neutral.

I think we should say, yes we have messed up but God has given us brains to find a way out of this and I think we need to be more forgiving of those who have unwittingly damaged our environment. How we deal with those who know they have and continue cynically to exploit it is perhaps a matter for another time.

So, in conclusion, Jesus reminds us very clearly in this passage that in many of the things we have done wrong in this world, of which the environment is just one, we need to find a way of forgiving and reconciling with each other if we are to enjoy God's forgiveness in all its fullness.