**Forgiveness is unfair**

*Psalm 103:1-12, Matthew 18:21-35*

*17th September 2023*

I have a confession to make. When my turn comes to be in the pulpit on a Sunday morning, it often seems, I drew the short straw. It sometimes feels I ‘get’ all the difficult texts to preach about. Of course, there is nothing deliberate or calculated about this, we use the Lectionary and we have to deal with the Bible passages as they appear in the Lectionary for any given Sunday. So, the problem must be with me! Clearly, I would like something easier, more comforting as perhaps we all do, when we come to church.

Yet, although the Gospel is good news, it is not always easy or comforting and today’s reading from Matthew’s Gospel proves it. It makes us think about forgiveness, one of Jesus’ most controversial teaching, which got him into trouble with the religious authorities of his time. Turning the other cheek could be a dangerous practice, it might put them out of business, they feared. And judging from Peter’s question about the limits of forgiveness, Jesus’ own followers had misgivings about it too. What’s more, even today those of us, who are trying to walk the path of faith, can testify that true forgiveness is the most difficult part of being the follower of Jesus. To forgive those who wronged us individually, or corporately, to forgive God for not protecting us from life’s hardships and most significantly (but far less talked about) to forgive ourselves for not really believing in the possibility and power of true forgiveness.

In Jesus’ exaggerated answer to forgive seven times seventy, he gently pokes fun of Peter, showing him that the question is, in fact, the wrong question. Forgiveness, like love cannot be measured by mathematical formulas. It is the question of those, who like clear cut rules, which, once obeyed, would automatically assure their acceptance as ‘good people’, God’s own chosen ones. But, according to Jesus, in God’s kingdom things don’t work like that.  To quote Cara Heafey, a URC minister using a saying “God is Master of the Arts and of all the Sciences. But God is *terrible* at Math’. In God’s economy one sheep has greater value than ninety-nine, the widow’s penny is prized above the large contributions of the wealthy, five loaves and two fish are enough to feed five thousand hungry people with twelve basketfuls left over, the last is first and the least the greatest. Forgiveness is bad Math, too. An eye for an eye is logical. Turn the other cheek is not.”

So Jesus tells one of his puzzling parables, which has given great headaches to its interpreters ever since. On the surface the story itself is about a king, who cancels an enormous debt owed to him by one of his servants. The servant then goes out and throws into jail a fellow-servant, who owes him a comparatively tiny sum. Hearing this, the king gets furious, he reverses his earlier decision and orders the ungrateful servant to be tortured until he repays all his un-repayable debt. The message we usually asked to take away from the parable is that God, like the king, has given us so much, forgiven us in such a big way that we should do the same with those who wronged us in any way.

There is nothing wrong with that, of course, until we get to the conclusion of the story as it stands. It says, we have to do this, ‘or else...!’ And at that point we are made to think, is this really how we should understand this parable? In the book *Good Goats*by the Linn family there is a recommended guidance for interpreting Gospel passages. If we can answer the question: “Is it good news? with a ‘yes’ than we are probably on the right lines to understand the meaning. If not, we are probably making a mistake, such as taking something literally which is really intended as an image.” If we do this with the story of the Unforgiving Servant, and ask ‘Is it good news?’ we have to answer, ‘not really’. Even if we accept the opinion of most commentators that verse 35, which identifies God with the king, is Matthew’s own addition, the picture of the king remains problematic. This king is a fickle tyrant, who is just as capable of cancelling a debt as torturing people to death. His dealing with his servants is based on their fear of punishment and instead of making them, or inspiring them to be better, if anything, they become worse. His forgiveness is a kind of transaction with provisos in the small print not made clear to the recipients.

This king cannot represent God. In his behaviour this king gives a different answer to Peter’s question, ‘How many times should I forgive?’ He would say, ‘Once, and that’s it!’

In contrast, Jesus’ way of forgiveness echoes the God of the Psalmist, whose words Beverley read to us from Psalm 103:

*The Lord is compassionate and gracious, long-suffering and ever faithful...*

*He has not treated us as our sins deserve or repaid us according to our misdeeds...*

*As far as east is from west, so far from us* *he put away our offences*.

Jesus’ whole vocation was to make known the unconditional love and endless mercy of the God he addressed as *Abba.*And to invite his followers to enter this same intimate relationship with God. And perhaps that is the crux of the matter: relationship. To be able to overlook the wrongs people may have done to us requires some kind of relationship. Forgiveness cannot happen in a vacuum. The king doesn’t know very much about his servants, he has to rely on his ‘books’ and on second-hand gossip to get any knowledge of them.

            Jesus, on the other hand gets ‘up close and personal’ with people. He talks to those that others wouldn’t. He shares table with disgraced outcasts. His forgiveness is offered freely, people don’t even have to ask for it. His relationships change people; they never leave people where they have been. There is a new future offered to them. Our grudges against others are often based on misunderstandings or superficial dislikes without knowing, or wanting to know the reasons of why they are the way they are. The sad thing is that sometimes we are able to nurture these hurts for a long time, and almost without noticing it, our un-forgiveness makes us stuck in the past. There is a corner of our soul, which is unable to move forward.

Having been forgiven and let off from his great debt the unforgiving servant was offered a better future. He could have started a new day with a clean sheet. But his mindset was keeping him in his former fearful state, he could not trust the one-off generosity of the king with a volatile temper, he still felt himself under judgement, so he vented his inner turmoil on his fellow servant.

Forgiveness is difficult and costly, and not only in relation to other people. Our inner turmoil is sometimes caused by our own unresolved guilt, when we cannot forgive ourselves for something we have done or said. And because these things are hard to share we tend to carry their burden without relief.

There is a lovely scene in the film *The Mission*, which we have studied in this church as one of our Lent courses some years ago. Mendoza, a mercenary in the colonising army kills his friend in a jealous rage. But, once he is faced with what he has done, he can’t forgive himself, he falls into a deadly despair, stops eating and just wants to die. Father Gabriel, a Jesuit priest is the only one who realises that Mendoza needs to be punished in order to be lifted out of his self-imposed darkness. So, he orders him to climb the dangerous heights to the upper ground of the mountains, where the church’s mission had founded a small Christian community out of the native population. Reluctantly, Mendoza agrees but insists on packing all the paraphernalia of his former life into a big bundle and carrying it with him. All through the torturous rock-climbing journey his burden forever keeps pulling him down but against all the advice he wouldn’t let it go.

Eventually, at the end of the journey, it is a young native boy with a sharp knife, who solves the problem. First he menacingly points the knife to the exhausted Mendoza’s throat showing that he could die and perhaps he should die. But then turns the knife and cuts the rope that ties Mendoza to the heavy burden of his past, and lets it fall into the abyss. After that he lovingly smiles at Mendoza and playfully starts tugging at his beard and hair. The simple acts of love and acceptance of the young boy finally breaks through Mendoza’ crusty heart, he bursts into tears and as all the natives gather round him laughing and stroking him, he lets go and lets himself be loved.

Strict justice may be fair and satisfying perhaps for all parties concerned, and it may even be necessary to keep some human atrocities at bay, but it is only divine forgiveness offered in unconditional love and those who practice it which can bring about true transformation. This is what we celebrate at the Lord’s Table. This is, what we give thanks for when we remember Jesus, whose love didn’t count the cost, who believed and enacted God’s infinite love and forgiveness which can never be revoked. This is what we ask for when we bring ourselves and others into God’s presence. May we be enabled to forgive as we hope to be forgiven. Let it be so.

*Erna Stevenson*