

## Year A: 14th Sunday of Trinity:

Readings: Matthew 18:21-35 Genesis 50:15-21 Father Paul Fitzpatrick

### Unlimited Forgiveness

One of the questions that arises from this morning's readings is: **What should we forgive and how do we do it?**

A Monastic story may give us a subtle answer. A young woman, as the story goes, who is heavy with child and terrified of being executed for dishonouring the family name, accuses a revered old monk, who prayed daily at the city gates, of assaulting her and fathering the child.

The people were vengeful and confronted the old man with the accusation. But the old man's only response to the frenzy of the crowd was a brief, "**Is that so?**" As he gazed into space and went on fingering his Rosary, the townspeople became even more infuriated and drove the culprit out of town.

Years later, the woman, exhausted by her guilt and wanting to relieve her burden and make restitution, finally admitted that it was her young lover, not the old monk, who fathered the child. In fear for his life as well as her own, she had lied about the attack. Stricken with regret, the townspeople rushed to the hermitage in the hills where the old man was still saying his prayers and leading his simple life. "The girl has admitted that you did not assault her," the people shouted. "What are you going to do about that?" But all the old monk answered was, "**Is that so?**" and went right on fingering his Rosary.

It is a challenging story for those who wanted justice. It is an even more thought-provoking story for those who felt that they had not been given justice.

For me, the story has a great deal to tell us about forgiveness: Often what other people do to us may have little or nothing to do with clemency. The fact is that there is nothing to forgive in life if and when we manage to create an interior life that has more to do with what we are than with what other people do to us. Hence the monks "**Is that so?**"

What we are inside determines how we react on the outside to others — no matter what they do. What we cannot forgive is what we have not supplied for ourselves independent of the responses of those around us.

Forgiveness is a gift that says two things. Firstly, I am just as weak as everyone else in the human race and I know it. Secondly, my inner life is too rich to be destroyed by anything outside of it.

The Monk could have been following the advice in today's first reading, which underlines the futility of revenge:

Joseph said " Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good..."

Nursing anger or holding onto vengeance is dangerous for our health, indeed fatal: it disables us and renders us defenceless when we look for our own sins to be forgiven.

**Year A: 14th Sunday of Trinity:**

Readings: Matthew 18:21-35 Genesis 50:15-21 Father Paul Fitzpatrick

In today's Gospel Matthew continues to deal with relations between Christians, focusing on the need for forgiveness between members of the community. Peter asks Jesus how often he should forgive his brother, then answers his own question by suggesting seven times.

In the Jewish tradition, the Law of Vengeance is taught that God forgives three times and punishes on the fourth occasion; it was not believed that wronged people could be more gracious than God, so forgiveness was limited to three times.

According to that tradition Peter's measure is generous; but according to Jesus it is radically insufficient. In his reply Jesus reverses the old law of vengeance: "If Cain is avenged seven times. Then Lamech seventy-seven times." (Genesis 4:24). Just as in the old days there was no limit to hatred and vengeance, so among us as Christians there is to be no limit to mercy and forgiveness.

The parable of the unforgiving official is told in order to underline the need for forgiveness. When a king calls his court officials to audit the accounts, one shows a deficiency of ten thousand talents, a colossal sum of money. The sum is deliberately extravagant, a talent today is roughly worth £350,000! So one slave owed him about £3.5 Billions!, to heighten the contrast with the few pounds owed to the official. When the king orders the sale of the debtor and his family into slavery, the official pleads for time. The king feels sorry for him and decides to remit the whole of the vast debt. The official, however, learns nothing from his experience, for he refuses to give a colleague time to pay a trifling debt; instead, he has him thrown into prison. When this heartless behaviour is reported to the king, the grant of full forgiveness is retracted and the unforgiving official is thrown to the torturers. I know there has been echo of that behaviour in my own life.

Apart from anything else, the unforgiving official is condemned for loss of memory. Forgetfulness of our own sins leads to lack of compassion; remembering how our sins have gone unpunished by God should lead us to forgive others. Through forgetfulness of God's compassion, we can end up becoming cruel to each other. That is why at the beginning of each Eucharist we are invited to be mindful of our own sins. Only when we do that can we pray the "Our Father": "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us".

The purpose of calling our sins to mind is not to paralyse us, but to remind us that we all live in the gracious forgiveness of God. To forget that is inviting ourselves into a theological car crash. Whoever we are, we remember our sins because we need to remember always to forgive. Perhaps when you pray The Lord's Prayer next and say Amen, maybe you can aspire to be like the Monk and add "**Is that so?**"