

Trinity 14 Forgiveness. St. Matthew Ch 18 v22 and Romans Ch14 v1.

St. Peter asked our Lord "How often shall I forgive? As many as seven times? No doubt he was thinking he was being very generous. Jesus replies, "Not seven times but seventy times seven" In other words you cannot put a number on forgiveness. Jesus then tells the story of a servant who was forgiven a huge debt, but then went and had a fellow servant put in prison for owing him a much smaller debt.

Forgiveness is at the heart of the Gospel. It forms a part of the Lord's Prayer and was on the lips of our Lord as he hung on the cross "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." They were blind to the fact that they were diminishing their humanity by acting in this way. WE are all made in the image of God. When we act inhumanly we damage the image of God within us and are not reflecting the love and grace of God. However we note that Jesus did not say "Forget the wrong done." Far from it. We cannot change the past. People must be held to account. Justice must be done. But by forgiving we destroy the hold which the past has over us, which can have a terrible power and affect the present and walk with us into the future. Our forgiven past can make a creative contribution to our future and help to restore relationships.

This has implications for our church and our lives. Our church life and fellowship should be a place where forgiveness and healing are known. A sign to the community of an alternative to division and confrontation. As St. Paul wrote "Welcome those who are weak in the faith but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions." AS a prayer states "Lord, make the door of our church wide enough to receive all who need human love and a Father's care and the penitent be assured of your mercy and forgiveness." Forgiveness also has a positive effect on our own lives. It takes courage and strength of character but it can have life changing results. Bishop Leonard Wilson had been a POW in a Japanese POW camp. He suffered as a result of that experience but he forgave his captors. That act led to one becoming a Christian and was later confirmed by Bishop Wilson. An example of forgiveness leading to a restoration of relationship and healing.

Austin Farrer who had been the Warden of Keble College Oxford described Forgiveness in these words "God forgives me with the compassion of His eyes but my back is turned to him. I will not receive his forgiveness. He takes my head between his hands and he turns my face to him to make me smile at him. Although I struggle and hurt those hands marked with the nails of crucifixion they do not let me go until he has smiled me into smiling. That is God's forgiveness. May we impart God's smile and so enhance lives with his presence.