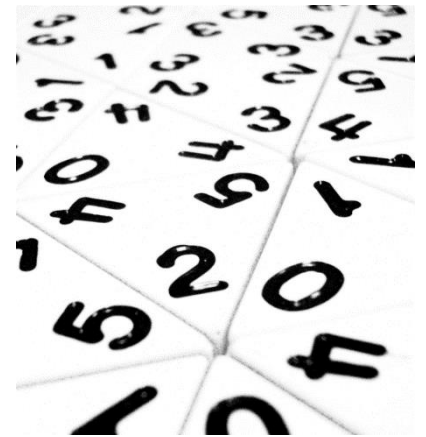


How many times? (Trinity 14)

[Romans 14: 1-12](#), [Matthew 18:21-35](#)

Numbers matter. At the moment, our special number is six. I am grateful to our Churchwarden, Alice, for explaining to me that the Government's choice of six as the specific number limit for gatherings as of Monday, 14th September (more numbers there, did you see?) is not completely random, but scientifically based on rates of transmission statistics for Covid which show that the R number does not hit the exponential up-tick at six.



Three is another significant number. You may have come across the expression, "three strikes and you're out": taken from baseball to show that if you don't run on the third "good" ball bowled at you, then you are out. It's also become an expression used in disciplinary matters. Two misdemeanours may warrant a series of warnings, but on the third instance, you may face the sack.

Six? Three? For Peter, the special number was seven. He was probably thinking that he was being very generous in his forgiveness, for the Rabbis taught that you should forgive a sinner three times.

We can feel safe with numbers. They give us a sense of being within clear boundaries. Six, three, seven: I have enough fingers and thumbs to count to any of the above numbers and don't need to stretch my mathematical skills too far to cope with them. Speed limits also keep us and other people safe. We have to know the numbers and stick to them.

Yet Jesus takes this nice, manageable way of looking at the world and relationships and turns it on its head. We should be forgiving people seventy-seven times, or



seventy times seven, as some translations have it. In other words, more than you have fingers, toes or even the largest computer to calculate the number of times. Forgiveness should not have any number attached to it.

Forgiveness is costly for both those who ask for it and those who give it. This can be seen most clearly in situations such as the period of reconciliation which followed the apartheid regime in South Africa. Desmond Tutu, in his book *God is not a Christian*¹, writes: "I believe that I certainly stand under pressure of God's Holy Spirit to say that when confession of wrongdoing is made, those of us who have been wronged must say, "We forgive you," and then together

¹ Desmond Tutu: *God is not a Christian*. Rider Books, 2011.)

we may move to the reconstruction of our land. The confession is not cheaply made and the response is not cheaply made.” (p. 29)

There may be times when we as a church family will need to reflect on our differences and seek forgiveness. This will not come cheaply, either. However, if we truly believe that we are loved and forgiven by God and claim that he is our Lord, then we are called to work together, because we are all loved and forgiven by the same Lord.

During our services of Holy Communion we share the Peace with one another. This is our special time to recognise that we may have differences with other people. Yet, we remember that we are called to bear with one another, to live with those differences and to return to the Source of our peace constantly.

When we make our sign of Peace using sign language, the action is like parting two curtains: it feels as if we’re letting the light in. Let us ask for God’s Holy Spirit to bring his peace and love to us, so that we can live well together, reflecting his glory in our wonderful differences.

Rev’d Vicky Barrett