

Forgiveness...

Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.¹

Peter asks how often I should forgive? as many as seven times. I remember as a child hearing this bible passage thinking that a lot, but Jesus replies not seven but seventy times seven. I was never good at mental arithmetic, but I remember someone shouting out 490 times.

As Jesus often did, he told he tell a story to help Peter and his followers understand.

The debt owed to the slave was 100 denarii, which was about four months' pay. Whereas the debt owed by the slave was 10,000 talents. A talent was actually a weight – an amount of silver or gold – but it was equivalent to about 6,000 denarii, or 20 years' pay. So 10,000 talents was an impossible 200,000 years' pay! The numbers do not really matter. The slave was forgiven 'zillions'! But he would not forgive someone else even a little bit. At the end of the story, Jesus implies that we are like the slave. The inequality of our refusal to forgive a small offence compared to Gods enormous forgiveness of our wrongdoing becomes ludicrous. We have been forgiven so much by God that we ought to be people who forgive others – not just once or twice, but all the time.

.C.S. Lewis writes, " everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until there is something to forgive" (Mere Christianity). What do we do then? What do we do when there is something to forgive? That is the challenge perhaps? Forgiveness can be hard, and we may rather hide our head in the sand than face it. But we are called to forgive. Forgiveness is the only way forward. That does not mean we 'forgive and forget' as though nothing has happened, It does not mean we ignore or excuse cruelty or injustice. We look to the future rather than the past. We should never give up making forgiveness and reconciliation our goal. If confrontation has to happen as it often does it must always be with forgiveness in mind never revenge. We try to see and love as God sees and loves. Forgiveness is a way in which we align our life with God's life. Tom wright says "if the 'heart' is open and able and willing to forgive others. It will also be open to receive God's love and forgiveness.

To return to Peter. What Jesus was trying to get Peter to understand and he wants us to understand it too. We shouldn't worry about keeping count of how many times we have forgiven someone -- we should just keep on forgiving. Isn't that what God does? He doesn't keep count of how many times he has forgiven us. He just keeps on forgiving. So, if someone were to ask you, 'How many times should I forgive?', what would your answer be?

A prayer

Eternal God,
slow to anger and swift to forgive,
fill our lives with the loving energy
of your compassionate Spirit,
that we may do justly, love mercy
and walk humbly with you, our God.

Amen.