

Readings and Reflection 13th September 2020

Reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgement on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgement on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God.

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God. For it is written,

*'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall give praise to God.'*

So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Reading from The Gospel according to Matthew.

Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'

'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.'

But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.

Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

Reflection *John Shaw*

Peter fulfils a very special role for the reader of Matthew's Gospel. He often misunderstands Jesus' actions or asks the questions we would wish to ask.

And here he is today, asking the question we would all like to ask about forgiving the actions of others. He is so eager to do the right thing. He had heard Jesus talk about forgiveness, so he wants to know more. And Peter must have done his homework. The rabbinic tradition says a person should forgive another who has sinned against them as many as four times. So, Peter, earnest and eager, tries to be even more extravagant and add three more times: "should I forgive a person even up to seven times?"

Perhaps Peter was expecting Jesus to praise him for suggesting such extravagant forgiveness. But Jesus replies "No, not seven times but seventy-seven times." Jesus offers a number so big that Peter can't begin to calculate it in terms of forgiveness. Peter wants a rule, a measurement, so he holds wide his hands and says, "This much, Lord!" And Jesus says, "No, much more than that. You're not even using the right scale. As far as the east is from the west, that's how much you should forgive." It is such an enormous amount of forgiveness; it would be senseless to try and calculate how much or how often.

I think Jesus' response is a way of saying the question and what it is trying to measure is not quite right. And, yet, many of us still sympathise with Peter. Like Peter, as followers of Jesus, we would like some benchmarks to know how we are doing. The problem with that is we start thinking of our character strengths as accomplishments of our virtuous self. Too easily we can slide into self-righteousness, the smug attitude that knows what real forgiveness is, who is a truly forgiving person and who is not, who deserves forgiveness and who does not.

Perhaps that's why Jesus tells Peter the story about the unforgiving servant. When it comes to forgiveness, we are all like servants who owe our Lord more than we can ever imagine. We can never pay back what we owe to God. But the good news is that God forgives us anyway. We forgive, then, because God forgives us. We should forgive not because we are moral heroes, but because we ourselves are forgiven. Completely, utterly forgiven and healed by Jesus. Our God is the God who forgives.

Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Amen