



St Marylebone
Parish Church

Romans 14.1-12 Matthew 18.21-35 (Sermon)

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

‘Forgiveness’ is something which runs deep through the pages of the New Testament.

It is the key to unlocking the meaning of many, if not all of Jesus’ miracles and parables, and as he hangs upon the cross, Jesus prays forgiveness for those who crucify him.

It is no coincidence, that St Peter, perhaps the most complex of all the disciples, the disciple who denies having any knowledge of Jesus just before the crucifixion, is the first disciple to hear Jesus’ words of forgiveness after our Lord’s Resurrection.

It is St Peter who puts a question about forgiveness to Jesus in this morning’s Gospel reading: ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?’.

Unusually, Jesus provides Peter with a more-or-less straightforward and immediate answer, ‘seventy-seven times’,

or ‘seventy times seven’, that is, ‘again and again and again – and again’; ‘as many times as it takes’.

To underline his point, Jesus goes on to tell those who are listening to this exchange with Peter, a parable, a story which not only underlines his already unequivocal answer to Peter, but which goes on to link our need to forgive others to God forgiving us.

Every day, we pray, ‘forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us’ – and we shall pray those words together in just a few minutes, but what do we mean by them; what do we understand by the words which fall so easily off our tongues, but which we find impossible to live out?

Last Sunday, at the 8.30 am service of Holy Communion, I spoke about a prayer which is often prayed with servers and choristers before a service starts, ‘Grant, O Lord, that what we sing with our lips, we may believe in our hearts, and what we believe in our hearts, we may show forth in our lives.’

It is a prayer which asks God for the grace we need to help us live congruent, integrated, whole lives; the grace to live lives which make joined-up sense: lives in which our actions match not only what we say but what we claim to believe.

I know, only too painfully, that my life, rarely matches up to what I believe; that my actions do not match up to what I say or claim to believe.

With St Paul, I know that, ‘the good which I know I should do, always seems to be just out of reach, and that what I end up doing is precisely what I know I shouldn’t do!’

We all, I sense, know the theory, why else would be here? We know, we believe that God loves us; we know, we believe that God forgives us, but, putting it into practice? Well, that’s a very different matter!

So, do we just give up?

Do we stop loving because we know that we can never match up to God’s love and that we will, inevitably, most of the time, get it wrong?

Do we stop forgiving because we know that we can never get near to forgiving others as God forgives us?

Of course not, we keep on keeping on; we keep on trying: trying to forgive, trying to love.

‘Lord, how often must I forgive? How often must I love? As often as seven times?’

No, we must forgive and we must love over and over and over again,

because the alternative of withholding love, withholding forgiveness, holding on to resentments, clinging on to grudges and nursing hurts, destroys and diminishes and kills; forgiving and loving (however haltingly or inadequately) are the only things which can break the all-too-damaging and destructive

cycles of anger and resentment and lead to wholeness and healing and life.

In the parable Jesus preaches to the crowd in answer to Peter, the king wipes out a debt that would have taken the debtor 164,000 years to earn, let alone repay.

God has forgiven us everything, because God loves us without reserve. God has wiped our slate clean, because he has forgiven us everything.

Jesus tells Peter, Jesus tells us to go and do likewise: to love and forgive as God loves and forgives us.

The only way in which we will know what it is to be forgiven, is if we mirror God's actions to us, if we try to love as we are loved and forgive as we ourselves have been forgiven.

Amen.