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## **Chapel of St Peter and St Paul, ORNC**

### **I Iam Choral Eucharist**

### **Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity [17 September 2023]**

readings: Genesis 50. 15-21; Romans 14. 1-12; Matthew 18. 21-35

What Jesus has to say about forgiveness lies at the very heart of the Christian Gospel. It also proves for most people to be one of its greatest stumbling blocks. And among those who often seem the most confused and conflicted about this part of the Gospel are Christians themselves. More often than we care to admit, we get ourselves into a terrible muddle about how we think we're supposed to be versus how we actually feel. We assume that if we're sincere in our love for God, then somehow forgiveness will come easily to us, and when it doesn't, we feel guilty and conclude that we must be pretty bad Christians. Or we think that to be forgiving must mean it's our job to let other people to walk all over us, and then we wonder why God would require this in the first place and why it is we feel so about it. The truth is that Christian forgiveness is at once more complicated and much simpler than most of us imagine. More complicated because it requires us to admit certain truths about ourselves we find it painful to acknowledge and which most of us will go to considerable lengths to avoid. And much simpler because the whole business of forgiveness has already been sorted out by God in any case, and all that's really required of us is that we simply get out of God's way and remember that we've already been forgiven, and out of that forgiveness we in turn are free to forgive others.

When, in our Gospel reading this morning, Peter asks Jesus how many times he should expect to forgive someone who's sinned against him, it's important to bear in mind the context in which he's posing the question. The Jewish tradition out of which Jesus and his disciples came dictated that in order to be righteous, one should be prepared to forgive another person three times. Which is why Peter thinks he's making a pretty extravagant suggestion when he asks Jesus if forgiving someone seven times should be enough. Neither he nor anyone else could have possibly predicted Jesus's response: 'I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven' – which was basically just a way of telling Peter that he should be prepared to forgive other people without limit, an infinite number of times (18.22). In so doing, Jesus makes it clear there is no legal formula that can ever hope to capture and quantify the true meaning of forgiveness. Jesus also manages to challenge Peter's assumption that he himself is the injured party, that he is the one who will be doing the forgiving. But if one is supposed to be constantly forgiving, then suddenly the moral certainty of that position doesn't seem quite so secure. To hear that we should always be ready to forgive in fact runs contrary to our sense of justice, our sense that people should be held accountable. After all, what kind of society could function if there were no consequences to bad behaviour and forgiveness was in unlimited supply? Yet here again, context is important. Earlier in this same passage from Matthew, Jesus makes it clear that among his followers, forgiveness never happens in isolation but always takes place in the context of community. It is therefore emphatically not about suggesting sin and aggression don't matter, or that Christians should go through life as human punching-bags. Rather, it is a recognition that even in the church, human conflict is inevitable. And so the question is not if we will sometimes hurt each other, but rather, what attitude we will take in confronting these hurts and resolving them. As with so much in the Christian life, then, we begin with relationship, and out of relationship comes a clearer vision of mercy.

Far from making us passive, then, to be forgiving in the way that Jesus requires is hard work. It demands clear thinking and emotional maturity. Not least, it demands that we let go of something most of us find very precious, which is our fondness for believing that when conflict arises, we must naturally be the victims and others the aggressors. Of course, there are plenty of examples in the world where people really are victims: of domestic violence, of economic

exploitation, of racial prejudice and homophobia, to name just a few. Telling people who've been subjected to such abuse not to feel sorry for themselves would merely compound the abuse that they've already suffered. But what I'm talking about is something at once more personal and more universal. And that's our basic human impulse not to take responsibility for ourselves, not to acknowledge our own patterns of self-interested behaviour, not to imagine that others are just as confused and tired out by life as we sometimes feel ourselves to be. 'If only I had charge of the world, then everything would be just fine; it's all those other people who are causing the problems.' Any forgiveness that proceeds from this mind-set isn't ever really forgiveness at all. For in the process, we haven't forgiven someone else so much as simply reasserted our own sense of superiority; we haven't released that person from their debt but instead simply stored it away, so that we can bring it up again later.

But when we claim to be forgiving in this way, we haven't come anywhere close to the posture of genuine forgiveness that Jesus advocates. For to be truly forgiving requires that first and foremost we are ready to understand ourselves as the forgiven. We forgive others not because we are fundamentally better people than they are, but because we recognise that like them, we ourselves are in constant need of forgiveness. And so the forgiveness that Jesus is preaching is a forgiveness that is always moving in two directions: the forgiver is always a forgiven person, and the forgiven person is always called to forgive. This of course is precisely what the parable we've just heard is getting at: the slave who is forgiven his massive debt by the king is in turn called upon to forgive a very much smaller debt owed to him by someone else (vv. 23ff). Every time we forgive someone else for something they've done against us, we are in fact testifying to the countless times that we ourselves have already been forgiven by God, and we are affirming our faith that God will continue to forgive and love us despite all the ways we manage to make a hash of things. 'Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us': every time we say the Lord's Prayer, we are reminding ourselves of this intimate connection between God's forgiveness and our own. We are surrendering the idea that to be forgiving has anything at all to do with our own virtue and everything to do with the power of God in the world. All we have to do – and admittedly, it's certainly not easy – is to allow God to be God, and to remember that we are his fallen, redeemed, grace-filled children. Not to do this is, like the unforgiving servant in the story, to consign ourselves to the misery of our own pride. But if we can really let God forgive us, then we start to be free to forgive in turn. And when we're free to forgive, then we really start to know what freedom is all about.