

***Forgiveness Re-Imagined* – a sermon by Rev Phil Wootton**
based on Matthew 18: 21-35 and Genesis 50: 15-21
Sunday 13th September: Christ Church, Good Shepherd & online

‘Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins / trespasses, as we forgive those who sin / trespass against us.’ Jesus’ words on forgiveness trip off the tongue so easily, familiarity smoothing their awkward edges. Whilst Christians aspire to forgiving and seeking forgiveness always, we acknowledge it’s not always straightforward; it’s not natural to human nature; and on the face of it forgiveness is fundamentally unjust. To use a term I coined a couple of weeks ago, it’s part of the upside-down, back-to-front nature of the kingdom of God. For in the kingdom of God, forgiveness touches everything. Today, we have two stories to help us re-image what it’s all about.

From the Old Testament, we heard the very last instalment of the on-going soap opera of the sons of Jacob. Jacob himself has died, and Joseph’s half-brothers fear this is the time for a reckoning. By the record of this dysfunctional family, their fears are hardly surprising. It may be many years since they had sold Joseph in to slavery, but there’s an old proverb: ‘Revenge is a dish best served cold.’ They expect it will be dished out now! Their brother is grand vizier of Egypt, yet he has this shameful history of having been a slave and a gaol-bird, and they’re responsible. Surely, he’s going to win his honour back now. So, the brothers try one last lie: ‘Before he died,’ they say, ‘our dad said you should forgive us. So, forgive us now, it’s what dad would have wanted.’ And then they have the cheek to bring God into it, calling themselves ‘servants of our father’s God’ – I suspect that was news to God as well as to Joseph. God has hardly had a mention in the previous 14 chapters of this saga.

Nevertheless, the message moves Joseph to tears and he makes a great statement, not just of magnanimity, but of faith: ‘You intended to harm me. But God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.’ Forgiveness comes out of a change of perspective. It does not say the wrong didn’t matter; it does not say, ‘no harm done’. Forgiveness is the deliberate decision to step away from the personal history of being wronged and feeling of being slighted, and focuses on the potential for renewed relationships, of being friends and brothers once more. It helps if you see the bigger picture – the picture with God’s purposes front and centre. Forgiveness is life re-imagined.

‘Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.’ Peter asked: ‘How many times should I forgive my brother when he sins against me? As many as seven times?’ And Jesus says, ‘Not seven times but seventy-seven?’ Forgiveness is not an equation but a lifestyle. To illustrate, Jesus tells a comic yet pointed story of servants in debt. The sums of money involved are ridiculous. A talent is 30kg of silver. 10,000 is a myriad in Greek, the biggest number they had. So this servant is up to his neck in debt; he owes gazillions! The hundred denarii the second servant owes is not miniscule – may be four months’ wages – but a paltry amount for someone with a gazillion in his back pocket! Don’t we cheer when the unmerciful servant gets his come-uppance! If ever punishment was deserved!

But soon we find we're cheering our own downfall – if we rightly recognise ourselves as the great debtors. But don't see this as entirely negative: Jesus is inviting us to a whole new perspective on life which is based in forgiveness. As sinners who know we are forgiven, we have freedom to forgive from the heart, and so find and build new relationships and re-imagine life's possibilities.

'Forgive us our debts as we forgive those who are indebted to us.' The words of the Lord's Prayer can be translated in either way. In our culture the repayment of debt is treated as a moral absolute. In the Bible, debts and sins are spoken of in much the same way, and both are forgivable. Some of us will have been brought up with the precept, 'Neither a borrower nor a lender be.' But in practice, in today's market economy, it's almost impossible not to be one or the other, or probably both. Money dangerously controls relationships. We may not intend it, but we tend to mix with people in similar circumstances to our own – haves and have-nots, debtors and creditors, those with a financial cushion and those living day to day. It's hard not at least subconsciously to make moral judgment on others: 'more money than sense;' 'can't be trusted with it;' 'must have been their own fault' ... or whatever it might be. If we're to hear Jesus' words to Peter, and realise how deeply we are in debt to God, we can only respond to others with equally deep humility. 'Forgive us our debts, as we forgive...'

It needs a serious bit of re-imagining, but it's not impossible. Most of you will remember the Jubilee 2000 campaign – the campaign for the cancellation of debt owed by many developing countries. Many commentators said it was impossible, reckless or irresponsible. In practice, although not everything was achieved, vast swathes of debt were cancelled. As a result, many countries had the freedom to provide free primary education for their children, or massively improve their health care systems. Poverty did not come to an end, but such forgiveness changed relationships and gave a new start in places that had little future.

I haven't quite worked out how, but I'm sure this thinking has something to say about one of our big contemporary issues: how we face up to the legacy of colonialism and empire. The issues are complex, and I do not claim a full answer. We have to face uncomfortable questions about whether and how we exploit, at the expense of others, the power and wealth that has been accumulated over centuries. If repentance and forgiveness are a familiar journey for us, we should have no reason to be afraid of facing those questions, because they open the prospect of new relationships – ones that are humble and honest – between people and nations, may be even the start of a re-imagined world order.

These are such big issues. As we open our minds to them, let's not forget the everyday – that forgiveness is at the heart of life together, at home, in church, with our neighbours, workmates and friends. Forgiveness is not to be calculated on a balance sheet or a complex form of algebra. Forgiveness is a way of life; indeed, it is life re-imagined. 'Father, forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.'