

There is no doubt that the readings from Matthew are tricky ones to tackle, add a dash of Romans and we often find ourselves in deep water! So here we are -forgiveness with some tolerance thrown in for good measure.

The suggestion that we should forgive others, as it is contained within the Lord's Prayer, is surely an impossible idea. What about the real world where people hurt others over and over again? some actions are unforgivable, aren't they? This is at the heart of the very practical question that Peter – yes its Peter again! – puts to Jesus. Jesus replies in the form of a parable that answers the question and gets to the heart of forgiveness.

It is a story about what it is like in Gods scheme of things – Gods kingdom – to which we are called. The truth is that we are all like the servant who owed millions. There are so many reasons why we are in no position to be "friends of the king" but Gods mercy makes forgiveness possible.

It is a story of shocking ingratitude. But it is also about a man who is unable to make a connection, which to us is obvious, between the huge, impossible debt he has been forgiven, and the much smaller, even trivial sum owed to him by his fellow-servant. The servant is forgiven but the forgiveness needs to be passed on. Its is obvious that those who receive mercy should pass it on, so Peter has his answer. *"forgive your brother or sister from your heart."*

We have been made fabulously rich by God in Jesus Christ. This is sometimes pictured as Christ paying a debt which we ourselves are unable to settle, or the making good of something we have damaged but cannot repair. This ought to stir up in us an overwhelming feeling of gratitude, and a desire to return this love. If we don't reciprocate the love shown to us, its like an electric circuit has been broken, and the energising charge of God's grace cannot take effect.

This idea of forgiveness as a kind of circuit is found at the heart of the prayer which Jesus taught us. It is the message of the parable of the Lost Son, who decides to 'spend, spend, spend', but whose inheritance fritters through his fingers because he has insisted on it as his right, rather than receiving it as a gift, lovingly passed to him from his father.

Earlier in Mathew we are told *"Freely you have received; freely give"* It is hard for us to shake off the traditional understanding of religion: 'to give in order to receive'. Ancient peoples made sacrifices in order to receive benefits, like protection, health, or good fortune. The problem is that when we think and act in this way, it makes God into a kind of super-politician; someone who will look after us if we give him our vote, but who will ignore us or punish us if we don't.

We could say that Jesus is inviting us to imagine a completely new way of living and interacting. Our attempt to bargain with God disappears, because there is nothing to bargain over. As the father of the Lost Son says to the elder brother: *'all I have is yours'*. That is why it was so important for the earliest Christians to try and live a kind of communal lifestyle, where they pooled their resources and renounced personal property. In this wonderfully imagined world, the idea of anyone insisting on their rights of possession, or angrily reclaiming what is owed to them, simply has no place.

Paul writes to the Romans very carefully as he tries to address a familiar challenge: how can different cultures and their innate prejudices, suspicions, memories and wounds live together as family? He challenges them to model an entirely new way of being human. He doesn't say that "weak" should wise up and start supplementing their vegetarian diet or come down on one side or another over days

of observance. What he does say is that each person must follow the path that God has given them, and they can be different yet equally obedient.

It would be easy to read this as an endorsement of individualism and lazy liberalism – it really doesn't matter what you do, as long as you think it's all right. Love is all you need. But that isn't really what Paul is saying. He appeals for them to make room for the differences of belief and behaviour, allowing for each other's weaknesses. He is trying to get them to see the bigger picture.

I think he is saying to them "This is not just about you and God but about the sweep of Gods saving grace in Jesus. While you sit there, trying to force your practices on other Christians, God is saving the world. Your small life will have ripples of consequences in Gods great design."

Will they be ripples flowing out from the flowing out from the huge impact of Gods forgiving love in Christ or just a very small trickle from a tiny, self-obsessed pebble, which has nothing to do with the tidal wave of Gods love.

Pauls challenge to the Roman church is our challenge too The attitude which Paul calls for from the Church community, and which the earliest Christians tried to practise in their 'communal' lifestyle, is strange to us. But by daily and persistent acts of selflessness, the immense good fortune of God's grace can be a felt, effective force in our lives, and in the world.

Right at the beginning I said that the suggestion that we should forgive others, as it is contained within the Lord's Prayer, is surely an impossible idea. *"Forgive us our sins as we forgive those that sin against us"*. Our desire and need for forgiveness, and our willingness to forgive others. In a moment we shall say those words as we come to the Lords table. An open table. We can be different yet equally obedient.

Forgiveness is at the heart of the Christian message because it is rooted in a selfless and self-effacing love for those with whom we journey through this life. Jesus is crystal clear in this teaching and any idea of there being an exception to Jesus' teaching on forgiveness only serves to distance us from God. Modelled so perfectly by Jesus himself, In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us and as he hangs upon the cross, Jesus prays on behalf of his executioners: *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"*.

Forgiveness, for Jesus, is not a quantifiable event. It is a quality; a way of being, a way of living, a way of loving, a way of relating, a way of thinking and seeing. It is nothing less than the way of Christ. If we are to follow Christ, then it must become our way as well.

Forgiveness creates space for new life. Forgiveness is an act of hopefulness and resurrection for the one who forgives. Forgiveness takes us out of darkness into light, from death to life.

It is the healing of our soul and life It disentangles us from the evil of another. It is the refusal to let our future be determined by the past. It is the letting go of the thoughts, the hatred, the fear that fill us so that we might live and love again.

These last words from Matthew then, are not a bizarre picture of an arbitrary or angry God, they are simple statement of fact.

how do we forgive? *"Forgive your brother or sister from your heart."*

How many times do we forgive *"I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."*

If God can forgive us, who are we not to forgive in turn?