

Fr David's Sermon for Trinity 14

'Forgive our sins as we forgive'

- Forgiveness is a struggle for all of us. We all give and receive wounds, bear resentments and nurse grudges about deeply hurtful things that have been said or done to us. Sometimes, too, we can find it hard to forgive ourselves.
- You may know the story of Corrie ten Boom? She and her family were Dutch Christians who saved many Jews from going to the concentration camps during WW2. In time they were discovered and Corrie and her sister were themselves sent to Ravensbruck concentration camp where her sister died. Corrie was set free – due to an administrative error – and wrote her autobiography 'The Hiding Place'. She tells of how she was speaking in a church in Munich in 1947 when she recognised, with horror, one of her former guards in the congregation. Terrible memories of the concentration camp and the unspeakable horrors inflicted on her and so many others came flooding back. The man spoke up and admitted he had been a guard there, but said he had become a Christian, knew that God had forgiven him and asked if Corrie would do so. She recounts:
 - "I stood there and could not. Betsie had died in that place – could he erase her slow terrible death simply by asking?" She describes wrestling with the most difficult thing she had ever had to do, continuing "For I had to do it – I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. Still I stood there with coldness clutching my heart... 'Jesus, help me!' I prayed silently. 'I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling'. And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one held out to me. And, as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. 'I forgive you, brother!' I cried. 'With all my heart!' For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then".
 - In today's Gospel, Peter asks Jesus how often he should forgive? As many as seven times? He was being generous as some rabbis taught that three was enough. But Jesus says seventy-seven, or seventy times seven, the Greek can be taken either way. But he surely did not mean that Peter should count! It was a way of saying forgiveness should be unconditional, unlimited. Jesus went on to tell a story of a King settling accounts with his slaves. One owed him 'ten thousand talents', an unimaginable amount of money, rather as if we might say 'a billion pounds.' Yet out of pity the King released him from penury and forgave him. The listeners -and we – might expect him to be equally generous with his fellow slave, who owed him a comparatively trifling amount. But no, even when the fellow slave pleads, using the very same words the first slave had used to the King, he has him thrown into the debtor's prison. On the face of it the conclusion is disturbing: that our heavenly Father will have us tortured if we do not forgive others! Whatever happened to seventy times seven? But Jesus is comparing the people in the story to our situation. God has forgiven us our sins. But we cannot truly receive that forgiveness unless we show mercy to one another: not just in words but 'from the heart'. I do not think Jesus is setting a condition for our forgiveness, any more than he is in the Lord's Prayer, when he bids us pray 'forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us'. Rather I believe he is showing us that the more we appreciate how much we are loved and forgiven, the more we will be enabled to forgive others.

- As Corrie ten Boom's story shows, forgiveness is not easy. There are some common misconceptions about it which need to be corrected:
- 1) Forgiving is not the same as forgetting. That may not be realistic. It is about how we take memories forward, without hatred and vindictiveness.
- 2) Forgiveness does not always lead to reconciliation. It often may, but it cannot be guaranteed and may even be undesirable, for example in an abusive relationship.
- 3) Forgiveness does not mean denying our hurt. Our feelings matter and should not be repressed or denied. Forgiveness is often a gradual process, with which we may need help.
- 4) Forgiveness is not primarily about how we feel, but an act of will, helped, for Christians, by God. We may still struggle with negative feelings after forgiving someone; it is our choice about how we behave towards them that matters, for example, not taking revenge.
- Forgiving and being forgiven are fundamental signs of the coming of God's Kingdom. By forgiving we show our comprehension of how much God loves and forgives us, and work with God to pass on the grace we have received to others.

'Forgive our sins as we forgive',

You taught us, Lord, to pray;

But you alone can grant us grace

To live the words we say.

How can your pardon reach and bless

The unforgiving heart

That broods on wrongs, and will not let

old bitterness depart?

In blazing light your cross reveals

The truth we dimly knew:

What trivial debts are owed to us,

How great our debt to you!

Lord, cleanse the depths within our souls,

And bid resentment cease.

Then bound to all in bonds of love,

Our lives will spread your peace. Amen.

