

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 14 SEPTEMBER 2008

Rev. Graham McAnalley

Matthew 18: 21-25

“Forgiveness: Limited or Unlimited?”

O for a bank manager or a credit card company like the king in this morning's Gospel reading! If you happen to know of one, tell me after the service.

Jesus was a master story-teller. But he didn't tell stories to entertain; he told stories to enlighten, to teach, to illustrate his teaching. The stories he told held the interest of his listeners for two reasons at least: they were about common experiences and issues in the everyday lives of those he was addressing; and they were ludicrously exaggerated, so much so that one could hardly believe that the situations being described could possibly exist. And, of course, they didn't. The stories were made up to suit the occasion; they were greatly exaggerated to drive home their point; and they left their hearers with a question – explicit or, more often, implicit.

Well, this morning's parable is true to form, but it is also frustrating. How does that parable about a king settling accounts with his servants tie in with Peter's question about forgiveness and Jesus' answer. The parable is clearly meant to drive home one particular point; but what is it? And what about the final verse of our reading?

*So my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if
you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.*

That's Matthew's comment on the parable, put into the mouth of Jesus, and Matthew is always pretty strong on judgement. But does it help us to understand the parable, or does it deflect our thoughts away from where the parable leaves us? Let's see if we can untangle it a bit.

This morning's reading follows on from last Sunday's reading, which was about relationships within one's community and about reconciliation in particular. Having heard what Jesus had to say about what one should do when another person sins against you, Peter, who is still learning what it means to follow Jesus, asks a quite reasonable question:

*Lord, if another member of the church sins against me,
how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?*

[Let me pause here to point out a bad translation in a good cause. The original Greek for “my brother” has been rendered, in the cause of inclusive language, as “another member of the church.” But that is misleading, because the church did not exist in the time of Jesus or for a long time afterwards. A better translation, still using inclusive language, would have been “my brother or sister” or even “anyone”.]

Well, back to Peter's question. Peter must have felt pretty pleased with his proposal. The rabbis taught that a person should forgive an offender three times, and Peter was going well beyond that. But Jesus was not so impressed by Peter's generosity of spirit.

Not seven times, I tell you, but seventy-seven times.

In other words, forgiveness should have no limits. To the Jews who knew their Bible, the “seventy-seven times” would remind them of the proud boast of Lamech to his wives, in Genesis 4:24, that he would avenge himself seventy-seven fold on anyone who dared to attack him. Jesus is presenting forgiveness as the opposite of revenge. Those who would follow Jesus, those who would live in the kingdom of God, must turn away from that very human desire to get even with those who wrong them – even those who wrong them again and again. Forgiveness, not revenge, is the way of Jesus.

To this conversation between Peter and Jesus, Matthew attaches a parable – a parable about the kingdom of God.

A king, an oriental despot, conducts an audit of his finances, and in doing so he comes across one of his servants who owes him 10,000 talents. Now that’s seriously big money. A labourer would have had to work more than 15 years to earn one talent, and this man owes 10,000 talents. No one could possibly borrow that amount of money, for it could never be repaid. This servant is clearly a high ranking official who has been embezzling funds, possibly taxation, that should have been passed on to the boss. The king does what is to be expected in that culture – what is proper and just and lawful. He orders that this servant, along with his wife and children and all his possessions, be sold. That won’t fetch anything like 10,000 talents, but at least he’ll get some money back and he’ll be rid of an untrustworthy official.

There follows a scene of great anguish. The embezzler falls to his knees and begs the king for time to pay his debt. A ridiculous plea, for he couldn’t possibly do that no matter how much time he had. And now the king does what is entirely unexpected. In the words of one commentator, he “displays the whimsical eccentricity of a despot: he abruptly reverses his decision and lets the villain off scot free.” He cancels the debt; and we breathe a sigh of relief. We don’t want to see the man’s wife and children sold into slavery for his wrongdoing.

The forgiven debtor must have been immensely relieved and grateful. But what effect did it have on his character? Apparently none at all. As he leaves the king’s presence he comes across a fellow servant who owes him 100 denarii. A denarius was the usual daily wage for a labourer. So it was a trifling sum, especially compared with the debt he had just been forgiven. But he seizes his debtor by the throat and demands immediate payment of the debt. The debtor pleads for time to pay:

Have patience with me, and I will pay you.

Heard those words before? They are exactly the same words as his creditor had used when pleading before the king. And the debt was small enough that, given a little time, it could have been easily repaid. But the creditor will show no pity; he has his debtor thrown into prison where he will remain until the debt is paid.

Other servants who got to hear about this were outraged. They reported the incident to the king. And the king, who was in such a generous mood a short time ago, was beside himself with rage. He summons the first servant:

You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?

In his anger the king hands this forgiven but unforgiving man over to be tortured until his original

debt is paid in full – and we know that will be never.

Well, how do we feel now? I suspect we've changed our mind about the servant who owed the king 10,000 talents. We're now glad to see him thrown into prison. If he can't bring himself to be merciful to a fellow servant after being forgiven such a huge debt himself, then he deserves all he gets. There must be limits to forgiveness. He didn't deserve to be forgiven in the first place, the ungrateful wretch!

And so the parable ends, with the once forgiven, unforgiving, and now unforgiven servant rotting in prison.

So what's the parable saying to us? It doesn't illustrate Jesus' teaching of unlimited forgiveness. It doesn't ask us to emulate either of the two main characters in the story, for they're both flawed characters. But what it does is this: it holds a mirror up to us. It shows us ourselves - perhaps in the forgiven servant who cannot be forgiving to another, and certainly in the once generous king who decides that there are limits to forgiveness, that forgiveness must be deserved. And so it helps us to see how far we are from living the way of Jesus.

Forgiveness is not unlimited. In families, in churches, in clubs, in workplaces, in politics, there are those who remember what others have done to offend or to harm them in some way – sometimes not once but often – and they harbour grudges. They cannot forget and they will not forgive. We see the same phenomena writ large in many parts of the world today – in the Middle East, in Sri Lanka, in Iraq and Afghanistan, in many parts of Africa. We see the ugly face of unforgiveness, the fear of what forgiveness might cost, as people resist attempts at reconciliation and peace. And we read our newspapers and watch our television screens and we are glad when we hear of people getting their just desserts. This is our world and most of us are at home in it.

One Friday afternoon, after a legal trial, after torture, mockery and cries for vengeance, a man hung bleeding, dying. And looking down on those caught up in the ways of this world, in cycles of vengeance and hatred, he whispered: "Father, forgive them...." And new possibilities were opened to us – possibilities of life and forgiveness, and reconciliation which flows from forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not condoning the wrong done; it is not continuing to ignore repeated wrongs; it is not pretending that wrongdoing does not entail consequences. It is, while acknowledging what is wrong, healing the relationships broken by that wrong. It is following the way of Jesus, who was willing to forgive his enemies in order to reconcile them to himself. And it is the recognition that we ourselves are freely and fully forgiven that enables us to walk in new ways of life, forgiveness and peace.