

‘Shouldn’t you have had mercy...as I had mercy on you?’
(Mt 18.33)

I am sure that a number of you will have lived in community at some time. I have done so in various places as a student and still have vivid memories of the experience, much of it good and some of it not so good. Once the behaviour of some students was so disruptive that the hall of residence became an unpleasant place to live and difficult things were said. After life had settled down again, tension remained between two groups of students. There were those who wanted to forgive their fellow students, but without really dealing with the problem. And then there were those who wanted to ensure that it never happened again by making a statement and seeing some sort of action taken.

We know that forgiveness is complex, but if tensions are not resolved in some way the burden can become heavier and heavier over the years, affecting every part of our lives. Jesus tells Peter not to limit the number of times he forgives someone and he calls on his followers to do the same. He also tells this parable. A slave is forgiven his own massive debt. But straight after he has been released, he refuses to forgive a fellow slave who owes him a relatively small amount. When his master finds out, the first slave is immediately put back in prison, his debt now unforgiven: ‘Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?’ There is a link between giving and receiving forgiveness.

It’s a provocative story with a very uncomfortable ending. What about those old grudges we still hold, people we’ve never quite managed to forgive sometimes for small things, sometimes for bigger ones? What lesson should we take from the parable about the nature and importance of forgiveness? Well, the first step is to understand how fully and freely we have been forgiven by God.

It’s only through our experience of grace that our hearts can begin to be transformed. And if our hearts are opened to forgive those who have sinned against us, that sets us free as well as them.

Jesus has already taught his followers to pray for forgiveness, in the Lord’s Prayer (Mt 6.12) and has said clearly that if you want to receive forgiveness, you have to be prepared to give it (Mt 6.14-15). Peter’s question and Jesus’ answer say it all. If you’re still counting how many times you’ve forgiven someone, you’re not really forgiving them at all but postponing revenge. ‘Seventy times seven’ is a typical bit of Jesus’ teasing. What he means is, don’t even think about counting – just do it.

Amen