

Matthew 18:21-35; Romans 14:1-12; Exodus 14:19-end.
Trinity 13, 14th September 2014
St. Andrew's Totteridge - 8:00 & 10:00 a.m.

Forgiveness – a central tenet of Christianity

O God, help us to listen to your Word with understanding, to receive it with faith, and to obey it with courage, for Jesus Christ's sake.

As you all know, last Thursday marked the 13th anniversary of the terrible atrocity at the World Trade Center in New York City. It was a terrible time, a bit like the assassination of JFK, one of those awful 'I will always remember where I was when it happened' moments, and we will remember the victims of that outrage in our prayers today. It signalled the defining moment in the life of one Osama bin Laden, a life that came to a violent end 3 years ago. Some would say that those who live by the sword must expect to die by the sword, but the journalist Simon Jenkins, writing in the Guardian, described how,

Had the world responded to his 9/11 attack on America with moderation he would probably have disappeared, expelled from Afghanistan or killed by his Tajik enemies. Even the Taliban were known to have been shocked by 9/11, when almost the entire Muslim world came out in sympathy with America (including the PLO in Palestine). It was a brief moment of American moral supremacy. Yet by launching armed aggression, first against Afghanistan and then against Iraq, America wholly squandered this gain. The aggression led to a tide of anti-Americanism and surge of support for fanatical Islamism across the Muslim world. The wars cost tens of thousands of lives and caused mass destruction. The billions of dollars expended on them was financed largely from borrowing, which in turn has destabilised the world economy.

In the last two readings from the gospel of Matthew, last weeks and today's, we have been hearing Christ speak to his disciples, where he is, in effect, giving a prophetic briefing for community leaders everywhere on the disciplines of the church. This last part emphasises the importance of an **unlimited forgiveness** as fundamental to the Christian way of being.

I have to lay my cards on the table and say that I found it difficult to understand the likes of Tony Blair and Barack Obama, both self-professed Christians, who actively disregarded Christ's teaching on forgiveness, not to mention his teaching on murder. When Jesus speaks to the rich young man in Mt. 19.18 he specifically says, 'You shall not murder... love your neighbour as yourself.' Obama sanctioned the assassination of Osama Bin Laden, and Tony Blair has recently described this act as 'immensely important' because,

"It dealt a huge psychological blow to their [Al Qaeda] movement but it doesn't alter the fact there are still large numbers of people out there who buy the narrative of this terrorist movement, even if they do not share or even agree with the methods."

When we look at what's going on with ISL in Iraq these days it's easy to see how revenge and retribution works its own special kind of ugly black magic. I believe that the only proper relationship with any human being is one of regarding them as brother or sister. Call that human being Jesus, Judas or Adolf Hitler. Or Osama bin Laden. One is not more my brother than the other. The part of me that would have condemned Hitler, and the Nazis who murdered half my Hungarian family, is the part that condemns myself and all my brothers and sisters for their sins. It's all too easy to create scapegoats, to deny responsibility for bringing our own darkness to light.

And there is another side to this. There is a part of me that would raise Jesus up onto a pedestal, but this is also the part of me that finds myself and others deficient and inadequate. Just because Jesus was able to walk through his own fears, doesn't mean to say that I shouldn't walk through mine. It is **because** Jesus walked through his own fears that he made me believe I can overcome mine.

But unlimited forgiveness seems to be a tall order. Peter's question *'how often should I forgive? As many as seven times seven?'* proposes a limit – Jesus multiplies that limit by ten, using a rhetorical device to suggest that, in effect, there should be no limit to the extent of human forgiveness. Here is an observation by the writer Paul Ferrini, from his book *The 12 Steps of Forgiveness*:

If Jesus could choose to love the very people who were pounding nails into his body, if He could see the face of Christ in them, how can we fail to see it in one another?

But somehow this seems to be very difficult for us. Why is that? Why do we so often fail to have compassion on even those who have done nothing personal to us at all? Is it because, deep down inside, we see something in them that reminds us of ourselves, something weak or hateful that we can't really stomach, because we haven't forgiven ourselves for the very things we loathe in that person? P.F. again,

"Why do we need forgiveness? Because every one of us has condemned ourselves. And every one of us has tried to work out of our self-hatred by projecting the responsibility for our problems onto others. But it just doesn't work. Self-hatred remains self-hatred, even when others become involved... deep down inside every one of us is a wounded child who needs to heal..."

But all is not lost. We can free ourselves from the mind-forged manacles that we are so often inclined to slap on others. A former chairman of the Church Missionary Society has written of how,

*'The road to freedom lies through forgiveness and there is no shortcut... the freedom of the Spirit by which Jesus lived is not achieved by shrugging off guilt, shame and conscience, but by going **beyond** them into the realm of forgiveness... not by pragmatic objectivity, but by going beyond the truth **about** things to the truth **of** things... not by repudiating good and*

*evil but by going **beyond** them to the Father...' (John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God*).*

It is only in facing up to our fears that we stand a chance of changing, of encountering the transformational power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, as it continually tries to work in everyone's life. Paul Ferrini again,

'Jesus did not tell us to deny our fear. He showed us how to walk through it. Don't think he was a stranger to temptation or doubt. He spent forty days in the desert. He cried out on the cross "Lord, why have you forsaken me?" He was human. He had a body. He felt pain. You cannot say that he did not know the depths of suffering. He did. But in the face of all that, he chose to love and to forgive. That is why he is such a powerful teacher for us. (PF)'

Of course we are none of us perfect, but fortunately we don't have to be perfect in order to forgive. Forgiveness, like the condition of our faith, is an on-going process in our lives. We forgive, we fall back into making judgements, and we have to forgive again. There can never be a time when Christians should stop trying to follow Christ, in refusing to demonise, in bringing our sins before God, or in being prepared to forgive others.

"Spoken in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen."