

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)  
(Sirach 27:30-28:7 / Matthew 18:21-35)  
17.09.2023  
Forgiveness

Dear brothers and sisters,

Both readings we have just heard this morning speak of forgiveness. In the Book of Ecclesiasticus, we heard: “Forgive your neighbour the hurt he does you, and when you pray, your sins will be forgiven. If a man nurses anger against another, can he then demand compassion from the Lord?” In the gospel passage we heard Peter say to Jesus: “Lord, how often must I forgive my brother or my sister if they wrong me? As often as seven times? Jesus answered, not seven, I tell you, but seventy-seven times”. In Semitic tradition, the number ‘seven’ implies completeness. So Peter is really asking if he must always forgive his brother or sister. Jesus gives an even more extravagant reply to Peter’s question: “Not seven, I tell you, but seventy seven times”. In other words, there is no end to the number of times we must forgive.

We have to forgive our neighbour always, because the Lord has forgiven and will continually forgive us all our sins if we repent. The Lord is never bored, tired or moody. He is always ready to forgive us. He never withholds his forgiveness of our sins. Again and again, He pardons us if only we ask Him. Even if we confess nearly always the same sins, the same weaknesses, He does not give up on us. There is no sin the Lord is not ready to forgive, even those “we” judge unforgivable, too grave to be forgiven. In the parable we have just heard, the king cancels a huge debt of ten thousand talents, that is to say millions of pounds! The message is clear: the Lord’s forgiveness is unlimited, his heart is full of mercy; his heart is mercy, unlimited mercy.

The Lord’s desire is that our hearts may become more and more hearts like his: forgiving hearts. A forgiving heart does not freeze or close at the first offence but remains open. A forgiving heart refuses to be paralyzed by bad blood harboured against others. It doesn’t hold on to resentment or grudges. Forgiving hearts are ready to give, to give freely without counting the cost, without thinking of what they will receive in return for their generosity. A forgiving heart is never tired of seeking to understand others and it respects their legitimate differences. A forgiving heart is open and compassionate to every kind of distress; a forgiving heart has no other ambition than to sow joy all around.

If our heart does not become more and more like God’s heart, the question for us will be along the lines: Who shall I seize by the throat and throttle when I leave this Eucharist? I guess your immediate reaction: Please, don’t exaggerate! But, am I exaggerating? If our heart is not a forgiving heart, sooner or later the question will arise for us: what sister, what brother shall we throw into prison by our indifference, by our irony, by our lack of concern, our lack of interest? What sister, what brother shall we throw into prison by our silence in a bid to force them to pay for an unfortunate act of injustice committed against us, or to charge them for not being like us? What is the point of being loved and forgiven by the Lord if we hold on to all these petty feelings of hate within ourselves? If we have been forgiven, called, welcomed, sent on mission and strengthened by the Lord, all this gives us the duty and responsibility to enlarge our horizons of service and friendship. If we look at God as He is, this should change our own regard and

dissolve our aggressive reactions, our sudden changes of mood, our childish and self-centred claims...

What is true for our personal relationships is also true for our relationship with the Church. The Church also is entitled to our smile, our indulgence, our patience, our love, in one word our forgiveness. Yes, there is the sexual abuse crisis; yes, there is the language of the Church which is sometimes out-dated, not to say irrelevant for many in today's culture; yes the liturgy of the Church can be boring; yes, the Church no longer offers the false security it once did in the past; yes, there is the weight of an institution which has to be reformed in order to serve its mission better. But the truth is that the Church is also our mother; the Church is the way to salvation which is offered to us; the Church is the way that leads us to Christ. Without the Church, we cannot grow in the knowledge of Christ. For these reasons, we have to be forgiving and merciful in her regard. The Church is a servant and she is a poor servant; but she has words of forgiveness to offer us in Christ's name; and so we have to be forgiving with her as well.

In life it can happen that we are on the receiving end of a very painful offence which at first sight seems to be unforgivable. But this does not mean that we have any right not to forgive. To fail to forgive is to refuse life. It is to choose death. Forgiveness is essential. It is true that to forgive a very painful offence is difficult and takes time. To choose to forgive a painful offence is to engage ourselves in a process, a slow process perhaps, but one which releases us as we journey toward forgiveness. To engage ourselves in a process of forgiveness is to choose not to remain paralyzed by the past, but to look to the future with hope and to walk the path of life with Christ.

A Reformed theologian once remarked: "To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you". May each one of us courageously consent, with the help of God's grace, to become free within ourselves and to set others free as well!