

Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

“Resentment and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight.”

Sirach 27, 30 – 28, 7

“The life and death of each of us has its influence on others; if we live, we live for the Lord; if we die, we die for the Lord...So where does that leave you when you criticise a brother? And where does that leave you when you condescend to a sister?”

Romans 14, 7-10

“The king summoned the man and said: ‘You evil servant! I forgave your entire debt when you begged me for mercy. Shouldn’t you be compelled to be merciful to your fellow servant who asked for mercy?’ The king was furious and put the screws to the man until he paid back his entire debt. And that’s exactly what my Father in heaven is going to do to each one of you who doesn’t forgive unconditionally anyone who asks for mercy.”

Matthew 18, 21-35



I am sometimes left with the impression that Matthew has used Peter’s reputation for speaking out without thinking as a cue for Jesus to launch into a story or parable to teach some lesson to those who had gathered to hear him. It’s as though Peter has been planted in the crowd to ask a leading question. Today’s gospel reading opens with one of those questions, to which Peter even volunteers an answer: “Peter got up the nerve to ask: ‘Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?’ Jesus replied: ‘Seven? Hardly. Try seventy times seven’” (Matthew 18, 21-22). That brief exchange was the trigger for Jesus to launch into another “kingdom of God” parable about how harbouring resentment and failing to forgive and seek forgiveness imprison people in their own bitterness.

The first reading from Sirach, the reading from Romans and Peter’s question cause us to stop and reflect on what can happen inside us when we rush to take the moral high ground when somebody hurts us in word, action or attitude. Sirach asks: “Should anyone nourish anger against others and expect healing from God?” Paul, in today’s second reading asks: “Where do resentment, condescension and seeking vengeance against your brothers and sisters leave you?” And Peter asks: “Isn’t there a limit to how many times I’m expected to forgive those who make my life miserable?”

Yet the parable that Jesus tells rises above wanting to measure out rules for forgiving. It challenges us to give our energy to working out the kind of family, community, parish, church and world in which we want to live our lives. Jesus makes the point that forgiveness and reconciliation are attitudes for living and relating rather than behaviours that we measure our when someone hurts or insults us.

In his book *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality*, Oblate priest and theologian, Ronald Rolheiser invites his readers to enter imaginatively into the following scene:

You are sitting one night with your family. You feel irritated, overtired and unappreciated. Something happens to push you beyond your patience, and you lose your temper suddenly. You yell at everyone, tell them they are selfish and stupid, throw your cup on the floor, and storm out, slamming the door behind you. Then you go and sulk in your room, feeling alienated, and sorry for yourself. Slowly, sanity and contrition get the better of your self-pity, but wounded pride and the rawness of what has happened make it too embarrassing for you to go back and apologise.

Eventually, you fall asleep, leaving the situation unreconciled. The next morning, now feeling doubly contrite and somewhat sheepish, but still with your pride wounded, you come to the family table. Everyone is sitting around having breakfast. You collect your cup, which somebody has picked up, washed and put back in the cupboard, pour yourself a coffee, and, without a word, sit down at the table. - your remorse and wounded pride evident in every move. Your family members aren't stupid, and neither are you. They all know the meaning of your actions. What is essential is being said, but wordlessly. You are making the basic move towards reconciliation. Your body and your actions are saying something more important than words: I want to be part of you again. At that moment, the haemorrhaging stops - even if only for that moment. If you dropped dead on the spot, you would be reconciled with your family.

When all is said and done, today's readings are all about the limitlessness of God's mercy and forgiveness and the need for us to imitate that to the best of our ability if we really want to be credible as disciples of Jesus. The high point of today's readings comes in the parable that Jesus tells on the prompting of Peter. The irony, of course, is that Peter, who suggests seven as the number of times for forgiving others, will later be forgiven by the Jesus whom he will disown and deny. However, in Jewish tradition, the number seven represented fullness and completion. In suggesting seventy-seven or even seventy times seven, Jesus made the point that our readiness to forgive others must be endless. To emphasise the message Jesus told the parable of the king who forgave his servant a debt that was almost incalculable. Understandably, the king couldn't believe what he was hearing when he learned that the servant, whose debt he had cancelled, refused to forgive a fellow servant who owed him a comparatively insignificant amount. A quick calculation of the debts reveals that the first servant owed the king ten thousand talents. - the equivalent of 60 million denarii or two hundred thousand years of wages, while the second servant owed his fellow worker the equivalent of one hundred days' earnings. In forgiving the first servant, the king knew that there was no way that he could repay his debt. But he gave in to the man's pleas and cancelled the debt. The second servant pleaded for mercy from his fellow worker, using identical words, but met with no compassion at all. Instead he was thrown into prison until the debt could be paid.

Sadly, the first servant failed to grasp that the consequence of being forgiven is an open-hearted readiness to forgive others. That, clearly, is a reminder to us all to look again at the only part of the prayer that Jesus taught which has a condition attached: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us!"

We all know from painful experience just how difficult it is to forgive and to ask for forgiveness. To forgive is not to pretend that we have not been hurt. But forgiving and asking for forgiveness does involve coming face to face with our sisters and brothers. But isn't it true that, when we find the courage to do that, we actually come to see our own failure, fragility and brokenness. We come to realise that we all have the same struggles, and that, ultimately, we are entirely dependent on God's bountiful love and mercy. The near incredible numbers in Jesus' parable convey the message that forgiveness is not something that is measured out in small or even large doses. Rather it is an attitude with which we are to approach everyone with whom we engage; it is an attitude which mirrors the love and mercy of God.