

PENTECOST 15A 13-09-2020 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Exodus 14.19-31; Exodus 15.1-13, 17-18 (in place of the Psalm); Romans 14.1-14; *Matthew 18.21-35*
Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, '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?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

The extracts from the book of Exodus we heard this morning as our Old Testament reading and in place of the Psalm tell the story of the escape from Egypt of the people of Israel. Last week we heard instructions for the first Passover Meal as they prepared to leave, and today we see them being led by God through the sea while their pursuers were drowned.

Then we joined in the victory song, as the people rejoiced that they had escaped from slavery.

This story is a foundational story of Judaism as it demonstrated God's powerful presence and activity with and on behalf of those ancient people. Are we meant to read it literally, in the same way we would read a newspaper report of, say, a fire or a flood? No, we are not. As one commentator has written, while this is not a historical narrative we can hear in it the living voice of the community of faith that was Israel.

Our next two readings- from the Letter to the Romans and Matthew's Gospel- were written many hundreds of years later, and both address Christian communities of faith.

Paul talks about the believers accepting one another's differences, acknowledging the multi-cultural, multi-faith and multi-ethnic community living in Rome at the time. He makes the point that what is most important is that they all belong to the Lord Jesus, so all will be judged by God- not each other.

Matthew's gospel continues Jesus' teaching about how the community of believers should manage issues of forgiveness. Last week we talked about the church responding to members who have done wrong, particularly in reference to the abuse of children and other vulnerable people.

Today we hear Peter asking how many times he must forgive someone who has wronged him. He suggests that seven times might be generous, but Jesus tells him 77 times- or possibly seventy times seven, the Hebrew is ambiguous. Seven was the number of perfection so whether Jesus meant 77 times or 70 times 7 he was really saying- as many times as it takes.

He went on to tell this parable of the unforgiving servant, which is both difficult and shocking to our ears. We need to remember that parables are not factual stories about actual people and events; they are memorable, short stories designed to make us think. They are not allegories, either, so we can't say that in this story the king represents God and therefore behaves like God.

How then do we understand this peculiar story? First of all, the slave owed an insane amount of money to the king, more than could be repaid over several lifetimes. Ten thousand talents is so much you may as well say he owed a gazillion dollars!

How anyone could get to owe that much is not explained, because it isn't important to the story. The king felt sorry for him and forgave him the debt. What?? How rich was the king then? That is unbelievable forgiveness. Hold that thought: unbelievable forgiveness.

Then this same slave, who had just got his life back, went out and attempted to strangle his mate who owed him the equivalent of a few week's wages. He refused to forgive this paltry debt and threw the unfortunate man into prison.

Unsurprisingly, the other slaves were not happy when they heard about this and they complained to the king. He called the forgiven slave back, told him off and handed him over to be tortured.

Now we can all understand the king being angry with such a wicked and ungrateful chap. Perhaps we could imagine God being angry with ungrateful humans. But can we imagine God handing people over to be tortured? Verse 15 has Jesus say, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

I do not believe the God of love will hand over anybody, no matter how wicked, to torture or hell or whatever you want to call it. I do believe that we put ourselves in dark places when we refuse to accept the forgiveness God offers us.

Peter wanted to know how much he needed to forgive others, so Jesus set out to show that God offers us limitless forgiveness. Our response, or our responsibility, is to forgive others when they wrong us; and if we refuse to forgive, how can we accept God's forgiveness for ourselves?

Some of us may find it hard to accept forgiveness. Some may find it hard to accept that we need forgiveness. Most of us know that we are far from perfect, and we have not loved God or our neighbour as we could and should have. That's why we confess our sins Sunday by Sunday when we are together. If we believe we should limit our forgiveness, as Peter seemed to be asking, how can we believe that God's forgiveness is without limits? If we harden our hearts, might we expect God's heart to be hardened towards us? If we believe that God is like us, we might forget that WE are made in God's image, not vice versa. God is so much more than we are- more loving, more forgiving, more generous, more life-giving- more everything that is beautiful and good.

There are times when forgiveness is incredibly difficult. If someone has badly hurt you or your loved one, forgiveness might feel impossible. In the past- I truly hope not anymore- wives have been told to forgive and keep on forgiving their abusive husbands, using this scripture and sending women back into danger and misery.

Forgiveness does not mean tolerating abusive, unacceptable behaviour. Neither does it mean we should beat ourselves up if we can't seem to manage it. When a relationship has become toxic, forgiveness may only be possible by letting go and walking away.

Forgiveness, for many of us, takes time, and I believe God blesses our willingness to forgive, our desire to forgive, knowing it might be a long process.

The forgiven slave could not enter the experience, the reality, of being forgiven. He couldn't accept his forgiveness enough to understand that he could also be forgiving. He refused to open his eyes to see that he had a new life as a forgiven person: no debt hanging over him, no burden to keep him awake at night. He was not free, even though he had been given freedom.

Because he couldn't make that step into freedom, he couldn't experience his king as a forgiving master. So he acted as an unforgiving master himself to his fellow slave. Then he truly experienced the anger and unforgiveness of the king.

The ancient Israelites were led out of Egypt to escape the oppression and cruelty of Pharaoh and their masters, and they journeyed for forty years seeking a place of freedom. Forgiveness can be a journey that leads us into freedom- the freedom to forgive others and to know that we are forgiven. There is the Good News Jesus brings- we are forgiven and loved, and so we can forgive and love.

The Lord be with you.