

## **A Forgiving Community**

**James 2 v8-17; Matthew 18 v21-35**

**14<sup>th</sup> October 2018, Farewell Service at St John's**

A forgiving community – that's the theme for today's service.

Last Sunday we began a sermon series reflecting on different aspects of the Christian community based on the letter of James. We focused last Sunday on the call to be a 'listening community'; to be 'slow to speak but quick to listen' as James puts it. This is a challenge; to truly listen is a difficult thing. But to forgive others who have hurt us is even harder.

Yet forgiveness is right at the heart of the Christian gospel, the Christian good news. We give thanks week by week that God forgives us, and we are called to share that forgiveness with others. But this is not easy. And it's also often very counter cultural.

C.S. Lewis writes in his classic book 'Mere Christianity' that 'forgiveness is one of the most unpopular Christian virtues.' He goes on 'everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive....And then, to mention the subject at all, is to be greeted with howls of anger. It is not that people think this too high and difficult a virtue; it is that they think it hateful and contemptible... "that sort of thing makes me sick" they say.'

Some people do indeed think of forgiveness as weak, ridiculous, even shameful. I think of Gordon Wilson whose daughter was killed by the IRA attack in Enniskillen, in 1987. (It's a long time ago now, but some of you may remember it – his reaction certainly had a big impact on me and I've never forgotten it) In the midst of his grief, he made a public

declaration that he was prepared to forgive his daughter's murderers and he subsequently devoted the rest of his life to the peace process in N Ireland. But his public declaration of forgiveness aroused violent reactions from many people – he was even sent 'hate mail'; abusive phone calls and letters from those who felt he was being less than human and 'unnatural' What kind of father was he? 'That sort of talk makes me sick' they said.

Hopefully talk of forgiveness does not rouse in us that same anger and contempt, yet at the same time there may be within us all a resistance to forgiving others. So let's reflect more on the call to be a 'forgiving community' this morning.

At first glance, our reading from the letter of James, doesn't seem to be about forgiveness but rather about law and judgement. James emphasises to his readers that unless they keep the whole law, the whole of the 10 commandments, then they are guilty and under judgement. Well, we might think, we do keep the 10 commandments, *we* don't murder or commit adultery. But if we take it a bit deeper and remember Jesus' teaching - that we are not even to be angry with one another, or to look at someone of the opposite sex with lust – then we'd have to admit that we've all failed. Indeed, if we ponder honestly the summary of the law which James refers to here – 'you shall love your neighbour as yourself' – which of us can claim that we have done that fully?

But fortunately, the good news is that 'mercy triumphs over judgement' as James says here. We do *not* keep the whole law, we do *not* love our neighbour as ourselves, *but* God is merciful towards us and forgives us our failures, and this is central to our faith. The further challenge, though, of course, is that if we have received mercy and forgiveness, then we

should show that same mercy and forgiveness to others. Forgiving and showing mercy to our neighbour is part of loving them as ourselves.

As we have been forgiven, so we ought to forgive. The parable we heard in our gospel reading brings this message home in a very powerful way.

Jesus tells the parable in response to Peter asking how often he should forgive someone who hurts him. Peter suggests 7x – no doubt feeling very virtuous and generous, as the rabbis of the time recommended 4x was sufficient. But Jesus' response is 'not 7x but 70x7' which is a way of saying that forgiveness should be unlimited. Listen, Jesus goes on, let me tell you a story.

Once there was a king who wanted to settle his servants' accounts. It was discovered that one of his servants owed him 10,000 talents. This was an unbelievable amount of money. The talent was the highest Greek currency and 10,000 the highest Greek numeral – So this was the equivalent of a billion pounds to us. An impossibly large debt. The servant pleads with the king 'be patient with me and I will repay everything'. Of course, he's clutching at straws as he'd never be able to repay such a debt. But the king does a very remarkable thing; out of pity for the man, he cancels the debt completely and lets him go.

We can imagine his huge sense of relief and joy as he skips out of the palace. But then he sees a mate of his – a fellow servant of the king. This man owes him 100 denarii – equivalent to us of about £4-5. He grabs his colleague by the scruff of the neck and demands, 'pay me back what you owe me!' The fellow servant responds pleadingly 'be patient with me and I

will pay you back' just in the same way he had earlier pleaded with the king. But he has no mercy and has his fellow servant thrown into prison until he repays the debt.

Of course when the king hears what has happened he's extremely angry. 'You wicked servant' he says 'I cancelled all that debt of yours. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' And the story ends with the man being thrown into prison until he can repay the whole debt, which of course he never can.

The problem with the first servant was that he hadn't really grasped just what the king had done for him in wiping out his huge debt. If he'd truly understood how amazing, how astonishing, that was, he would never have asked his fellow servant for the piffling amount he owed him.

Knowing the depth of God's forgiveness of us is the Christian motivation to forgive. When we have realised how incredible God's forgiveness of us is, we will then have the desire and the strength to forgive others.

It may be that as we look at the painful ways others have hurt us or let us down, that it all seems huge and unforgivable. We can begin to build up an account of what others 'owe' us for what they have said and done. We keep a record of our grievances. Meanwhile, we think of ourselves as the 'innocent party' – not a bad person really. But the gospel offers us a radically different perspective. Whether we have committed any great crime or not, we are all as human beings riddled with a deep and destructive self-centredness and we all fall short of the glory of God, as Paul puts it. Before God we are all at the same level.

The more awareness I have of God's mercy and forgiveness towards me, the more I will be able to see others in that same light, and I may then begin to see my own hurts and grievances in a new way.

Forgiveness is hard. But it's not a matter of a kind liberal tolerance that says that nothing really matters and it's OK however we behave towards one another. The King in the parable doesn't say 'don't worry, it's OK, you don't really owe me anything'; no, he wipes out the debt. The debt is real – both the debt we owe God and the debts we owe one another. It's not that we need to pretend that hurts haven't happened or don't matter, but that we begin to see them in the light of God's forgiveness and mercy.

Sometimes perhaps we have too high expectations of others whilst being complacent about ourselves.. We turn a blind eye to our own faults and sins yet are harshly impatient and unforgiving towards the faults and sins of others. We have a log in our own eye yet we are trying to get out a speck in our neighbours eye. We need to see straight. And to remember we are a community of forgiven sinners not of perfect saints.

I said earlier that forgiveness is central to our Christian faith. It's also central to our communion service week by week. We *confess* our sins and give thanks for God's forgiveness of us, Sunday by Sunday. We also share the *peace* together. At this point in our service we remind ourselves that 'Christ is our peace', that he brings us back in relationship with God and one another. Of course sharing the peace is a symbolic action; it is not meant to be a time for long discussions of the ways we've hurt one another. Nevertheless the peace is still meant to express a reality about our relationships with one another; it is not just an empty gesture. So if we do have a grievance against someone in the congregation, or know that we

need to say sorry to someone, we need to act on that as soon as we can and be reconciled to them.

Of course, forgiving some things can be relatively easy; but forgiving deeper, more serious or long standing hurts can be much more difficult. Forgiveness may not happen in a moment but may be a very long process. Perhaps sometimes, we might not truthfully be able to say 'I want to forgive this person' but we may at least be able to pray that 'I want to want to forgive them' and that is a good start. Perhaps asking for the support and prayers of someone else in the Christian community can also help us.

As you know, this is my last service at St John's before I move to Geneva, though I am sure David and I will be back here regularly. As I leave, I pray for the community here at St John's. I give thanks for those relationships of grace and kindness, love and mercy, forgiveness and healing that I have encountered and pray that such relationships will deepen and grow. But I also pray for each of us as individuals, because we cannot be a forgiving community without being open, each one of us, to the deep love and mercy of God in our own lives. So I pray that we will all make time to be in God's presence; time for prayerful solitude and silence, time to receive God's love day by day. For the deeper our own personal awareness of God's mercy and forgiveness the more we will have the grace to share that in the community of the church and with the wider world.