

ON BEING FORGIVING¹

**A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh in St James' Church,
King Street, Sydney, on the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 17 September 2017**

As you all no doubt remember, I last preached on today's gospel in 2005.² In that year, Pentecost 15 was on 11 September and I found myself talking about forgiveness in the context of the anniversary of a horrendous tragedy. That sermon brought home to me the realisation that it is impossible to direct or order someone to be forgiving. How can I, who does not feel another's pain, dare to express a view about what that other person should do. Yet this appears to be exactly what Jesus is doing. Of course, his words are general and in response to a question. They are not in the context of any actual offence. Nevertheless, we are being instructed, in a blanket sense, to forgive. It might even be worse than that, since what Jesus says seems to ignore context altogether, and it is context that gives everything its meaning. Worse still, the command seems to come with a threat: forgive or God won't forgive you.

That this is a real question can be seen by a motion passed at our recent General Synod. The motion concerned domestic violence. The effect of certain theological positions on the prevalence of such violence in our churches has been a matter of recent public discussion, adding to the effects of revelations about child sexual abuse. The motion said, amongst other things, "No victim of domestic abuse should ever be pressured to forgive, submit to, or restore a relationship with an offender."³ That such a motion made sense is evidence of the existence of a pressure to forgive within our own religious community.

But, before we leap to any such conclusions, we should seek to understand more closely the parable that Jesus uses. Here I want to repeat some of what I said 12 years ago. The parable of the Unjust Steward is based on oppositional positions and exaggerations, just as Jesus exaggerated his response to Peter's question. Take, for example, the slave who was forgiven a great debt. He owed a massive 10,000 talents, most probably not as a result of borrowing but because he was a senior governor responsible for delivering the taxes of a whole province. By contrast to the sum that this servant owes, Herod the Great's whole kingdom had an annual income of only 800 to 900 talents.

A talent, as a unit of ancient currency, was worth 6,000 denarii, thus 10,000 talents comprised 60 million denarii. If we know that a denarius was the daily wage of a labourer, the equivalent of the minimum wage, this huge amount is the combined wages of 164,384 labourers if they worked all day, every day, for an entire year. Alternatively, calculated at the current Australian minimum wage of \$694.90 per a five-day week, or \$139 per day, 10,000 talents equal \$8.34 billion. Exaggeration indeed!

¹ Readings: Exodus 14:19-31; Psalm 114; Romans 14:1-14; Matthew 18:21-35

² In preparing this sermon I have had reference to the following: Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: a Sociopolitical and Religious Reading*, NY, Orbis Books, 2003; John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, San Francisco, HarperSanFrancisco, 1992; Neal F Fisher, *The Parables of Jesus: Glimpses of God's Reign*, NY, Crossroad Press, 1990; Marilyn Gustin, *How to Read and Pray the Parables*, Liguori, MO, Liguori Publications, 1992; Joachim Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables*, NY, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966; Daniel Patte, *The Gospel According to Matthew: a Structural Commentary on Matthew's Faith*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1987; Pheme Perkins, *Hearing the Parables of Jesus*, Ramsey NJ, Paulist Press, 1981; Ulrich Utz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995; Leo Zanchettin (ed), *Matthew, a Devotional Commentary*, Mahwah NJ, Paulist Press, 1997

³ <http://sydneyanglicans.net/news/domestic-violence-first-priority>

Thus, when the king gives the slave another chance, he does so not only as a generous gesture. He is, to a certain extent, dependent on these slaves. Without their efforts, he has no income. On the other hand, he must exercise his authority. He threatens the slave, who then grovels at his feet. Thus, by both showing his authority and exercising his random clemency, the king asserts himself. The forgiven slave has, however, learnt only part of the lesson from his king. He has discovered how to threaten but not how to enlist and co-opt. We need to understand that all these slaves belong to a hierarchy and the forgiven slave is close to the top. It is of great concern to his subordinates that his unreasonable behaviour has been visited on someone similarly under his command. They could be next. So, the imprisoned junior slave's colleagues conspire to destroy their superior by going over his head. They have great success.

That's the end of the repeat; now for something completely different. We usually think of the king in such parables as representing God. That may be a mistake here; this king is most unlike the God shown to us by Jesus. He is self-interested and ruthless. He exhibits little by way of love and compassion. Thus, the emphasis of this parable is on the slaves and their behaviour. What we can see is that the refusal to forgive has serious consequences these individuals and for the community that they form in their master's household.

This is an important observation because of the way in which Matthew has written his account of the question leading up to the parable. As we heard last week, the final part of Chapter 18 deals with community relationships. Matthew introduces the word "church" (ἐκκλησία in Greek) into the text. This is an anachronism, since this word was not part of the vocabulary that Jesus used. Matthew is placing Jesus' words in the context of problems arising in the Christian community in Antioch to which he was addressing his gospel. This is not to say that Jesus did not use the parable. It is to say that Matthew has directed it specifically to his emerging Christian community. The question is, therefore, not so much about whether or not God will forgive. It is about what lack of forgiveness does to the life of the community and the people in it.

Before a person can forgive, he or she must make a judgement about guilt. That is why Peter asks about his response to the person who sins against him. That is, Peter has taken offence at whatever the other person has done and has concluded that that person is guilty, has done something on purpose or negligently and should be held to account. We all do this. I am not supposing that we all consider such things forensically, analysing it to a high degree. What we feel first is the hurt. We then attribute the blame.

To a certain extent, Paul is dealing with a similar situation in his letter to the Christians in Rome. Chapter 14 begins by setting out the details of a problem that must have arisen in many new Christian communities that comprised both Jews and gentiles. Church members were accusing each other of sinning. The subject matter was food. We are familiar with disputes about food; vegetarians, vegans and pescatarians have views about what it is proper to eat. Some of those views are about health, others about morality. In Paul's case, it was not about which kinds of food, but about which food. In many parts of the Roman empire, all the available meat had already been sacrificed to idols. Jewish Christians knew that such food should not be eaten. They also had rules about how beasts should be slaughtered. Gentile Christians may also want to distance themselves from such food or, possibly, they thought the whole thing irrelevant.

Apart from caring for each other, Paul encouraged us not to be judgemental. Making judgements is a necessary precursor to recognising hurt and hurt leads to the possibility of forgiveness.⁴

We are in a quandary. We can see how failure to forgive affects the community. We can also see why persons should not, in some circumstances, be obliged to forgive. How can we resolve this quandary? Well, in the first place, we should understand that to forgive is not necessarily to pardon. To put the distinction sharply, a pardoned person gets out of jail. A forgiven person stays there. To forgive is not necessarily to remove consequences.

Next, we should understand that forgiveness is not an event, it is a process. Ultimately, the major victim of non-forgiveness is not the perpetrator. Often the perpetrator neither knows nor cares what I do. In the long run, I am the person who suffers if I do not or cannot forgive. I have cast this in the first person because we usually make a mistake when we turn the words of Jesus into rules, things that apply to others. In this morning's gospel, Peter asks the question about himself. It is to him that Jesus replies. So also, the question of forgiveness is a question asked of me; it is not a question that I ask you.

Forgiveness is one part of a process by which I can move on, by which I can cease to be bound by the hurt that has been done to me. Not to forgive is, amongst other things, continuing to give power to the offender. Perhaps that is what Jesus meant when he said that God would not forgive me if I did not also forgive. It is not a punishment, it is a consequence of remaining bound myself. It comes back to me every time. I am the one who needs to continue to grow with and before God and in our own time.

The American Quaker poet, John Greenleaf Whittier⁵ wrote:

Forgiveness

My heart was heavy, for its trust had been
Abused, its kindness answered with foul wrong;
So, turning gloomily from my fellow-men,
One summer Sabbath day I strolled among
The green mounds of the village burial-place;
Where, pondering how all human love and hate
Find one sad level; and how, soon or late,
Wronged and wrongdoer, each with meekened face,
And cold hands folded over a still heart,
Pass the green threshold of our common grave,
Whither all footsteps tend, whence none depart,
Awed for myself, and pitying my race,
Our common sorrow, like a mighty wave,
Swept all my pride away, and trembling I forgave!⁶

⁴ Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans Part 2*, London, SPCK, 2004, 94-109

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Greenleaf_Whittier Also author of "Dear Lord and Father of mankind" (NEH 353) "Immortal love for ever full" (NEH 378) "O Brother Man, fold to thy heart thy brother":

O Brother Man, fold to thy heart thy brother:

Where pity dwells, the peace of God is there;

To worship rightly is to love each other,

Each smile a hymn, each kindly word a prayer.

⁶ John Greenleaf Whittier, <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/forgiveness/>

