

Reflection for Trinity 15 Matthew 18:21-35

Most of our lives we tend, unconsciously or otherwise, to live in a sort of cost benefit mindset. The business world, when making decisions, often uses this process. It is a process that is used to estimate costs and benefits to determine their profitability to the organisation concerned. We are conditioned into a version of this from childhood. If you work hard at school and pass all your exams you will be able to go to university and then get a good job, for example. The legendary MGM producer Sam Goldwyn famously said there is no such thing as a free lunch. We are conditioned to expect a cost for everything.

Peter in this passage obviously is uncertain about this whole forgiveness thing. 'How many times do I have to forgive my brother?' he asks Jesus. In his mind there must be some sort of limit to forgiveness. But no, Jesus tells him there is no limit to the number of times we can be forgiven.

The story of the despotic king anxious to settle accounts with his servant's accounts can be disquieting. 'Is this how God is?' we might ask ourselves. Is God keeping account of all our misdeeds? Are we going to have to face a seemingly endless list of failures for which we have to pay the price? The answer is, of course, no; God does not behave like this. The story is told in an exaggerated form to make a point. The point is simply to emphasise the magnanimity of God's mercy. God's mercy, like His capacity to forgive, is endless.

The question of forgiveness is a two-way thing. It is not unusual to hear people say, 'I can't forgive him or her for this.' An unwillingness to forgive creates bitterness which eats into our very being. It is in forgiving that we too are forgiven. We may find it hard to understand why a dastardly crime has been perpetrated, but that is not for us. We may hate the sin but not the sinner.

We also must learn to accept forgiveness. Things may trouble our conscience, we may find it hard to realise that we too can be forgiven, that we are forgiven. We are in good company, Peter found it hard to accept that he could be forgiven. The dreadful night when he, Peter, denied his Lord not once but three times. Could he possibly be forgiven? Jesus works hard to convince Peter that he has not forfeited his right to the role that has been prepared for him. Peter struggles to accept that Jesus can possibly have a task for him. One of the ironies of Scripture is that the keys of the Kingdom should be given to one who has doubts as to whether he should be let in. Accepting forgiveness for ourselves can be just as difficult as forgiving others. There is a relationship between God's forgiveness and our readiness to forgive. It is not simply a matter of God will forgive if I forgive. In the Lord's prayer we say, Forgive us our sins as we forgive others. It is not then that we are forgiven 'if' we forgive but 'as' we forgive. As I forgive, I find that I am forgiven. Love is the wellspring of forgiveness. Neither love or forgiveness is a soft option or expression of weakness.

*May we see Christ in others that we may be Christ to others,
that we may dwell in Him and He in us.*

*Heavenly Father, our hearts struggle
to forgive wholly and fully.*

We thank you for demonstrating such forgiveness

By graciously extending it to us.

Help us to forgive freely

and let go of bitterness,

and grant us the strength to trust your way is best.

Amen