



Sunday Reflection Ordinary Time

in the Charges of St Margarets, Renfrew
& St Johns, Johnstone



For Sunday 17 September 2023

Pentecost 16 Season of Creation

**This week Rev Lis and Rev Robert
Chambers are preaching in our Charges.
The text of Lisa's homily is below.**

Gospel Reflection Pentecost 16 Season of Creation Week 3

Today we think about what it means to be forgiven and to forgive. This is not just a spiritual matter but affects our lives as Christians in the world and the relationships between nations of the global north and south. In God's Kingdom, slavery and debt are wiped out by compassion and we are accountable for showing to others the mercy that has been shown to us.

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?" (Matthew 18.32-3).

An illustration to set the scene

In May 2005, Abigail Witchalls, a young woman of 26 was walking home through the picturesque village of Little Bookham in Surrey. She was pushing her 21 month-old son, Joseph, as they made their way back from that week's session of Messy Monkeys. She was 5 months' pregnant. A young man, a local, high on drink and drugs appeared and stabbed her in the back of the neck. She survived – just – but she was left paralysed from the neck down and it was four years before she regained any speech. Miraculously, her son was born naturally a few month's later and she has subsequently also given birth to a daughter.

Not the least remarkable aspect of this terrible incident was the reaction of the family, including Abigail herself. Devout Roman Catholics, they expressed pity for the attacker and the hope that he would find the treatment he needed for whatever problems had driven him to the crime. Alas, the man believed to be responsible, overcome by guilt, took his own life before this or justice could take place.

Reflecting on this week's Gospel

For most of us, Our Lord's injunction to forgive 77 times -countless times in fact - can seem extravagant, an impossibly high bar. We wonder how we might have responded if Abigail had been our daughter.

The parable that Jesus tells helps us to make sense of the teaching. In the story the king is served by many who are, literally, indebted to him. It is that debt that keeps them in bondage and one day he decides it is time for the accounts to be settled. One slave has accumulated a vast debt – the equivalent of billions of pounds (this is a story of big numbers!). The king judges that this one who owes much but cannot pay should be sold, along with family and the money used to redeem his debt. But then the slave pleads for more time to pay and the king is moved and goes further and cancels his debt.

We know this language. Indebtedness, and the loss of freedom it led to, was a familiar experience for the Jewish people, for Jesus and the early church. It was a metaphor close at hand to explain the magnitude the extravagant mercy of God's love for us.

The extravagance of the forgiveness is exactly the point! God's forgiveness knows no bounds. As we hear in today's Psalm,

As far as the east is from the west

So far he removes our transgressions from us. (Psalm 103.12).

And the Psalmist doesn't mean just the unbridgeable gulf between Edinburgh from Glasgow!

But the story doesn't end there because the servant whose debt has been forgiven is merciless when it comes to someone else who owes him a relatively small debt. He is deaf to his debtor's pleas and has him thrown into prison until he can pay. The other slaves are appalled and outraged who report to the king who re-instates the unforgiving slave's debt and has him tortured.

We are accountable for our behaviour to others. As Paul admonishes us in Roman's, judgement belongs to God. It isn't our place to judge others – meat eaters and vegetarians should not waste time slagging each other off. Rather it is the bigger picture we are accountable for, co-operating with God's plan for justice and mercy for the earth. We mustn't be enslaved by the bondage of guilt or resentment in ways that make us stingy or slow to forgive. As St Paul writes,

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. (Romans 13.8)

The measure of our forgiveness of others is the forgiveness that we ourselves have already received. And so we pray,

Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.

Application to our own lives

The Gospel story is about the radical Christian witness of forgiveness in costly personal interaction, especially in what should be the exemplary community of the church but the message is equally applicable to global relationships in the face of the climate emergency.

Climate Change is throwing people into debt. After Hurricane Idai in 2019 Mozambique was forced to take out loans to rebuild vital infrastructure, roads, hospitals, schools. Just a couple of years later Hurricane Ana in 2022 destroyed some of the infrastructure that had been built and Hurricane Freddy followed in 2023. Each disaster increases the debt for the country.

Families struck by climate change related disaster such as floods or drought may lose their harvest for the year. Then the only way to buy seed and other necessities will be to take out loans. Survival becomes more and

more difficult as they are servicing the loan and when another disaster strikes -the family is thrust into abject poverty. This is a scenario we in the West of Scotland should readily understand, albeit the debt here may be to replace a broken washing machine or get the car needed to get to work. Nations have accused nations in the climate crisis, and looked to hold to account those incurring a 'climate debt' of pollution and habitat destruction. The concept of 'Loss and Damage' was highlighted in Glasgow at COP26 and at the COP27 UN climate summit in 2022 it was agreed to create a fund for addressing losses and damages in particularly vulnerable nations. But the amounts being offered for the fund are a minuscule fraction of what's needed to help poorer nations prepare for the effects which cannot be evaded. Any acceptance of what's offered already amounts to spectacularly gracious forgiveness of the 'trillions' extracted by the Northern empires. How can we in the Global North joyfully and generously accept such payments as an investment in the security of all and part of our spiritual requirement to forgive others their debts? To know and believe ourselves set free and enabled by forgiveness rather than paralysed and disabled by guilt is basic to Christian discipleship. It's the liberating hope of anyone who has prospered in the societies of the Global North. And it's true in our personal lives too.

Some years after her accident, Abigail Witchalls went to Lourdes for the second time. On the first occasion she had been a student eager to understand how those in need might be healed. This time, she was the one in a wheelchair. In her book she recounts how in the years since her accident she had prayed for healing. But at Lourdes she now prayed, 'Heal me in the way I need most according to your will'. 'I have more to give now I'm paralysed than when I was able-bodied', she says.

This is the paradox of the Cross. Lightness out of dark, forgiveness out of pain.

When Abigail lay in the intensive care unit, her family knew she would live when she blinked out the following haiku:

Still, silent body/ but within my spirit sings/ dancing in love light.

Our king has settled our account. Enslaved by the weakness and failures of our human condition we are freed by our baptism to live in his kingdom of mercy and to forgive others in like measure.

In a little while in the Thanksgiving Prayer we will hear again how evil and all that holds us in thrall has been overcome by the saving act of Christ Jesus:

*Through Christ you revealed yourself in the world,
and bring your saving work to its completion.
Obedient to your will he died upon the Cross.
By your power you raised him from the dead.
He broke the bonds of evil
and set your people free
to be his Body in the world.*

So too in our lives. In forgiveness, generosity and compassion we find life and freedom. In the words of St Francis, recalling the new birth of our baptism:

*For it is in giving that we receive.
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned.
It is in dying we are born to eternal life.*

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? (Matthew 18.32-3).

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