

In Jewish tradition it was taught that God forgives three times and then punishes on the fourth occasion, so when Peter suggests that forgiving the neighbour who does him wrong seven times, he thinks he is being more than generous. So the reply from Jesus is quite shocking; seventy seven times. In other words you forgive all the time and never stop forgiving. For Peter and possibly for us, this seems totally unreasonable. And that is just the point. Jesus is applying the standards of God. God who sends his Son so that all of our sins can be forgiven, again and again. There is nothing reasonable about going to confession and expecting every sin we have ever committed to be forgiven and yet that is precisely what Jesus will do for us. There is nothing reasonable in the parable about the king cancelling a massive debt - the equivalent of millions of pounds, and yet this is what he is prepared to do. This vast debt is then compared with the trifling amount that the official is unwilling to forgive. Hyperbole or exaggeration is used to make the point. And I think we all get the point – that if God can forgive anything and everything, surely there is a reasonable expectation on us to forgive others. However much this seems to make sense, however reasonable it might be on paper. We know how difficult it can be.

How do we forgive the person who abuses a child ? How do we forgive the drunk driver who causes a fatal accident ? How can the people of Ukraine forgive Putin's war ? How do we forgive those who deny the climate crisis in order to pursue personal profit. We can all add to that list and I'm not going to offer a pious answer to each example, just to say, we all get how difficult the business of forgiveness can be and yet without it we end up being part of the spiral of misery ourselves, even unwittingly . When we are able to forgive, there is liberation and true freedom, but it may not come easily or quickly and it certainly doesn't come without faith and hope in God's infinite goodness and faith in the possibility of conversion. I remember once listening to someone who was abused as a child and after many, many years, as an adult finally confronted and forgave the person who abused him. When asked how this felt, he said that this person no longer had the right to live rent free in his head. He was free. So although we try to forgive because it is the right thing to do, because Jesus tells us to, it is often simply the best thing to do.

When we are faced with a situation or a person we feel we just can't forgive, we need to add one word to that phrase *I can't forgive*. The word is *yet*. Jesus asks us never to close the door on the possibility of forgiveness. Often the situation may be just too raw, but the desire for forgiveness is a bit like the desire to pray. If we want it enough, we find it begins to happen. Ultimately we

can't make much sense of the teaching on forgiving others unless or until we have experienced total forgiveness ourselves. The servant in the parable wasn't expected to forgive the debt of his fellow servant until his own massive debt had been cancelled. Our ability to forgive others is not a condition of God's love for us, but it should certainly flow from it. To understand a little bit more about the enormity of the sacrifice that God makes for us in order to cancel our debt, we have the Alpha course starting in the Parish next week. When we grasp more about how much God wants to forgive us, then we have more of an idea about going beyond what is merely reasonable or just in our dealings with others. This is what makes the difference. This is what marks us out as Christians because as St Paul says, the life and death of each of us has its influence on others. Being able to receive forgiveness is a very powerful influence.

We have seen strong teaching today from both old and new testaments about the power of forgiveness, but such Wisdom is not only found in the Judeo Christian tradition. I will finish with another kind of parable taken from Native American culture :

An old Cherokee chief was teaching his grandson about life.

He said, a fight is going on inside me between two wolves.

The dark one is evil, he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride and ego.

The light wolf is good. He is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, empathy, truth, compassion and faith.

The same fight is going on within everyone he said.

The grandson asks *which wolf will win ?*

The old man answers – *the one you feed.*