

SERMON 13 SEPTEMBER 2020
ST JOHN THE BAPTIST
10.00 A.M. (Socially Distanced)
14th Sunday after Trinity (Proper 19)

Readings:

Genesis 50:15-21
Romans 14:1-12
Matthew 18:21-35

Prayer:

Lord, may my words and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Sermon:

Please sit down.

I awoke a few weeks ago to the voice of Janna Ezat, whose son Hussein Al-Umari was murdered at Al Noor Mosque by Brenton Tarrant. She said: "I decided to forgive you Mr Tarrant because I don't have hate. I don't have revenge. In our Muslim faith we say we are able to forgive. I forgive you!" We were then told that Tarrant nodded in acknowledgment before blinking profusely and wiping one of his eyes. It was the only show of emotion from him that day.

When thinking about forgiveness I often go back to 8th November 1987 and the IRA Bomb which exploded during the Remembrance Day Parade in Enniskillen. I have always remembered Gordon Wilson, whose daughter was killed by that bomb, as he called for forgiveness and reconciliation and went on to campaign for peace.

There are of course countless examples of people such as these who extend forgiveness at times of acute personal tragedy brought about by the senseless, wilful aggression of others. And inevitably, at this time of year, our minds turn to what happened in New York on 11 September 2001.

Forgiveness is not an easy subject; indeed, I think we could stay here a week and not fully unravel the depth of it yet in the Lord's Prayer it says: "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

Of course, as we all know, forgiveness may come in stages; it can be a slow process and I am acquainted with one former priest who has found herself unable to forgive the suicide bomber who killed her daughter on 7 July 2005. She asserts, with integrity, that forgiveness requires the guilty party to request it; but, whilst she cannot forgive, she does not advocate revenge as many do.

All three of today's readings suggest that God has different standards of judgement from ours as they warn that the obvious immediate reaction to a particular incident may be quite wrong, if considered in the overall context of God's activity in the world.

Let's look first at the story of Joseph and his brothers because this idea is easier to see here. There is no denying that Joseph's brothers treated him abominably and even they did not excuse their behaviour. They realised that their reaction to an aggravating, spoiled little brother was completely out of proportion and so they cannot believe Joseph's forgiveness. Although, they have been living safely and comfortable in Egypt for some time, under Joseph's protection, they still expect it to be withdrawn as soon as their father dies. They know what they deserve from Joseph.

But fortunately for them, Joseph has seen the bigger picture. He has seen what God has done through the violent jealousy of his brothers and he has seen that he was not the only one to benefit;

all the Egyptian people, who might have starved without Joseph's foresight, have been saved. Had Joseph not been brought to Egypt, many would have perished.

Secondly, in the parable Jesus tells of the slave who was forgiven a great debt, £2.4m in our currency, but then went out and dealt mercilessly with a fellow-servant who owed him something less than £5, we learn that for his lack of mercy the forgiven slave was utterly condemned. The point Jesus was making was that 'a person must forgive to be forgiven'.

If we do not forgive others, then we cannot hope that God will forgive us. And the figures used in the parable indicate that nothing anyone can do to us compares with what we have done to God. If God has forgiven us the debt we owe to him then we must forgive other people the debts they owe to us.

Both Joseph and the forgiven slave find out that what they initially thought was just between God and themselves turns out to affect many, many others which is what Paul is endeavouring to tell the Romans.

Whilst the Romans were trying to force their own practices on other Christians, God was working in the wider world.

Paul pointed out that our small life will have ripples of consequences in God's great design and we need to grasp the big picture that God in Christ is 'Lord of both the dead and the living'.

Now it is easy to think we haven't done anything serious for which God needs to forgive us. But I suggest if we put these three passages together and consider the wider implications then perhaps, we in the West should view our society as one that requires a lot of forgiveness from others and God.

We are in the season of Creationtide and the theme this year is: "Jubilee, or rest, for the Earth". In honour of that, and thinking about forgiveness, we need to consider the integral relationship between a rest for the Earth and ecological, economic, social and political ways of living. Covid-19 has revealed our shared human nature and the inter-connectivity of our economies, political structures, health care systems, food production chains, energy and transportation systems in devastating ways. The pandemic also demonstrated that the entire web is rooted in the Earth and limited by the Earth's capacity to sustain our economic and ecological demands. The unjust effects of climate change are a consequence of our inability, in the developed Nations, to find a sustainable balance.

We in the West have consumed and are consuming more of the earth's resources and thus need forgiveness for this. As we recover from the effects of the pandemic, can we work towards new just and sustainable ways of living to give everyone enough, restore habitats and renew biological diversity.

Lewis wrote a powerful piece, a few weeks ago, for our Newssheet about our consumption of meat and pointed out that if we, individually, reduce our consumption it will have little effect but that is no justification for doing nothing. If we all reduce, then the sum of these reductions will add up.

During Lockdown we all appreciated the beauty of nature and the polluting effects of many of our normal activities. How wonderful to hear bird song normally drowned by sound pollution from road and air travel. And how fresh and clean the air was as evidenced in the plant growth and bird reproduction rate. Can we use our cars less? Could we put our central heating down a notch and wear a jumper inside? Could we move to renewable energy? Can we forgo the odd foreign holiday? The list is endless.

We are all guilty and I think that is where we need to look to God for his forgiveness and endeavour to learn, what this virus has so powerfully demonstrated, that we are a part of God's glorious creation alongside other forms of natural life and subject to creation's forces as so ably expressed in the recent World Wildlife Report.

So let us, as we come to the Lord's prayer today, and in our daily prayers consider how much we need God's forgiveness for our overindulgence and say: "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us" with new insight and determination to change.

Amen.