

Morningside

17-09-2017

Matthew 18: 23-35.

Four hundred and ninety.

Last Sunday we acted out in mime a story of Jesus. How would that work with today's story? One man owes another 100 denarii. Suppose the debt was to be paid off in five pence pieces. His debt could be carried in one pocket. The other man owes ten thousand talents. To carry that would take an army of carriers, nine thousand of them! Each of them carrying a sack of five-pence pieces 60 pounds in weight. And if they walked one yard apart, the line of carriers would be five miles long!

It all starts with Peter saying to Jesus *Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?* Jesus replied *Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven.* Then Jesus goes straight into the story. There was a king whose servant had run up a huge debt (our imagined mime shows how huge). He could not pay, so the king ordered him to be sold as a slave. The poor wretch begged for a chance, and the king agreed. No sooner was the servant out of the room when he came upon a friend who owed him a small debt – a pocketful of change. Payment was demanded, could not be made, and the creditor had the man who owed the handful of sixpences thrown in jail. When the king heard this he was outraged, and imprisoned the man who had refused to treat the small debtor with mercy, the very man whose enormous debt the king had forgiven.

I don't think the king is meant to be God in the story but I am sure that the story is meant to tell Peter that he should forgive as God forgives. Not seven times not even four hundred and ninety times. Forgiveness as God forgives doesn't count the numbers and doesn't count the cost. Every Sunday, every day, we pray the words of the Lord's Prayer *Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.* Our nine thousand sacks of sin against the pocketful of sins done against us.

Most of us can be very thankful that we have not had to deal with drunk drivers who have killed our innocent children, or swindlers who have stolen

our life-savings. Some people have those experiences, and some people have behaved wonderfully. But all of us have been hurt, have been let down, have been treated badly. And each of us is Peter, saying to Jesus *Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?* And we hear Jesus replying to each of us as to Peter *Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven.*

I don't pretend that forgiving is easy. I don't claim that I am good at it. But I know that it is what Jesus asks of us; and I do know that his words are quite clear when he says God will forgive us just on the terms that we forgive others. So how are we to do it? What do I need in order to learn to forgive?

The first thing we need is courage. It takes courage to face up to an old grudge and take the decision to do something about it. It takes courage to do what Jesus commands. Much of the time we would rather not forgive. As the dame in Tam o'Shanter nursed her wrath to keep it warm so we find ourselves nursing a hurt, nursing a hurt over many years, until it has become part of our make-up, part of our psyche. Never mind the harm this grudge does to us, never mind that we know it is wrong, never mind how often we say to ourselves "I do want to begin to forgive" we don't do it. We don't do it because we are afraid. We are afraid that we will be successful. We are afraid that we will learn to forgive. And, fools that we are, we would rather live with the hurt and suffer with the hurt and not even try.

What if you were to make a start today? Would you have the courage to send a card, knock on a door, speak a word of forgiveness to someone whose life is tormented by a wrong done to you?

Once a Glasgow minister went to see a member of his congregation who could not get to church. He knew her well, and he knew that her life was poisoned by a twenty year quarrel with her only sister, which caused them both great pain. He went to ask her to listen to the Christmas Eve Watchnight Service on radio. *It's coming from our church and I'm preaching and during the sermon I will be thinking of you. Please listen carefully because I will be saying something to you. And I hope it will help.* During the

broadcast sermon he said this *If there is someone with whom you have quarrelled, someone whom once you loved but now you are apart, let tomorrow be the day of healing. Please pick up the phone tomorrow and say to that other person "Let's start again"*

Two or three days after Christmas he went to see the woman again. She welcomed him: *Thank you, minister, for that beautiful sermon. I recognized immediately the part that was for me and I want to thank you for it. Well, on Christmas Day I sat beside the phone for the whole day; and do you know this? My sister never phoned.*

To forgive as Jesus wants you to you need the courage to start; and you need the patience to keep going. It takes time for the blockages that have been building up in your heart to be cleared. Not in one day will your memory allow you to deal with all the stories, the sayings, the actions, which it has been storing up inside you to blacken the person who has hurt you. You need patience to get used to the idea of forgiving. You may need to try over and over again. "Seven times?" asked Peter. "Seven?" came the reply. "Hardly. Try four hundred and ninety". Equally importantly, it takes time for the person who has hurt you to move on, to evolve, to change, to enter into the new relationship. Forgiveness that is to last will not be achieved in a moment.

This morning we heard the climax of the story of Joseph; and a very moving climax it was. You remember the all the early bitterness. The young Joseph having those dreams in which his brothers had to bow down to him because he was top-dog. The simmering resentment. The plot of the brothers to kill him; and then selling him as a slave in Egypt. Then all the years of separation; until the brothers come to Joseph in all his magnificence because they are desperate for food. It took years and years: years of Joseph's struggle with his own resentment; years of the brothers living with their guilt; years of God working with both of them. And at the end of it all, Joseph speaks these moving words of forgiveness: *Don't be afraid. Do I act for God? Don't you see, you planned evil against me but God used those same plans for my good, as you see all around you right now—life for many*

*people. Easy now, you have nothing to fear; I'll take care of you and your children." He reassured them, speaking with them heart-to-heart. Perfect! But it took a life-time to get there.*

No-one ever said forgiveness was easy. But it is the command of Christ. And it is the command of Christ for two good reasons. The first is that forgiveness works. It is the way, the way, to heal old wounds, to bind up broken hearts, and to build a new future. Forgiveness gives God room to do the divine work of reconciliation. It is what works to make things better.

The second reason that forgiveness is the command of Christ is this. Not forgiving makes things worse. It makes things worse for you: bitterness and resentment build up inside you and they make you a worse person. Years of not forgiving make a solution further and further away. Revenge simply does not work: it does not work for you and it does not work for the person you try to hurt. What was it the old Chinese philosopher said? *Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves.*