



Sermon: - 24th July 2016

“Lord, teach us to pray!”

*What does it mean to pray, as we do every week,
“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors”?*

“**Lord, teach us to pray!**” The plea of the disciples all those hundreds of years ago continues to echo through the centuries, because we all want to know how to pray and how to pray more effectively. The answer that Jesus gave them is a model of prayer that has been used throughout the centuries, is used throughout the world, and of course we use Sunday by Sunday.

It encompasses all the aspects of prayer that we need to place our needs and our concerns before God. It begins with praise. All our encounters with God should begin with praise. The first thing we do when we come into church on Sunday morning is to praise God. Our first prayer, the prayer of approach, is a prayer of praise. Only after we have declared his worth, his glory and his Majesty can we properly respond to him, can we take to God our needs and the needs of others.

This model prayer does indeed teach us how to pray. Yet I wonder if, because of its familiarity, we really think about the words we use or what they mean, or what we are asking when we say them. Because it occurs to me that sometimes, perhaps we don't really think about them, or really understand what we are asking.

This morning in particular I want to look at the phrase ...”Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” Or, forgive me my sins, inasmuch as I forgive those who have sinned against me. I think these are surely the most terrifying words in the bible. The implication is that if I do not forgive others I will not myself be forgiven. And if I am not forgiven by God, then I am above all people to be pitied, there is no hope for me.

There is no doubt that the bible is clear on this point. Forgiveness matters. Firstly it matters that God forgives us. The whole point of the Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection, the point of the Christ event, the point of all that we celebrate through Advent, Christmas, Holy Week and Easter, is to show us that we need to be forgiven.

Human beings are sinful creatures. It is our human frailty that leads to so many of the evil things in this world. Greed, hatred, selfishness lead to war and famine, disaster and tragedy. The great sins of the human race are simply exaggerations of the little sins of individuals. But humanity was never so low, never so far from the grace of God, never so steeped in wrongdoing, as when we nailed the Son of God to a cross. We are a sinful people.

In following the Ten Commandments, even 90% success is not a pass mark. Jesus tells us that if we fail in one point we fail in the whole law. “But I'm not so bad,” we might say, “I do my best, I am a decent human being, I am not guilty of these terrible sins”. Yet the problem is that in a sense we are. It is that bit of human nature which is selfish and self-centred that ultimately leads to all the evils in the world. While it is true that we are not wicked or evil, and do not perpetrate the sins against others that we see daily on our television screens, nevertheless it our same human impulses that can, if not restrained and redirected, lead to these great evils. It is anger and greed and fear which lead to all the evils in the world, and which of us is completely free from these things?

We need to be saved from ourselves, and we need to be freed from sin.

The good news, the gospel of Christ, is just this: God has promised to do this, to give us our freedom, "If we confess our sins he is faithful and just and he will forgive our sins!" No caveat there! No condition attached to forgiveness other than that we believe. No requirement or qualification necessary, other than we admit our fault and ask for God's forgiveness.

And yet here, in this little phrase in this prayer that Jesus taught us is a condition that ought to strike terror into our hearts. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

There is of course a sense of natural justice about this. Jesus warns us elsewhere about the danger of paying so much attention to the speck of dust in our brother's eye that we don't notice the huge log that is in our own, or in this case the whole tree! Jesus understood human nature. He was well aware of all the faults and foibles that we carry around with us, which sadly we are all too unaware of. And there is an extent, is there not, to which we are inclined to be more accepting of our own faults and failings than that of others. So we excuse our behaviour, we justify ourselves while at the same time bearing grudges towards others because we feel they have caused us some harm. I know this, because I find myself doing it!

For example, we may criticise lying in others, but have we never bent the truth because we were afraid of the consequences of telling it as it is?

What we might call standing up for ourselves, and justifiable firmness, in another we might call unreasonable demands or selfishness.

We might pride ourselves on our plain speaking, while we find another's speech rude and aggressive.

We denounce benefit fraud, but what about being generous in our estimates in our tax returns?

Are we really so squeaky clean that we can afford to criticise the behaviour of others?

The novel, *The Shack*, tells the story of a man who in a vision went to heaven and met God. At one point in the encounter the man is taken into a room which he is told is the judging room. He protests, "I'm not ready to be judged." God responds, "Oh you're not going to be judged, you are the one doing the judging." The man says, "But I can't do that, that's not my place." God replies, "Why not, you do it every day on earth." Does that sound familiar to you? I confess it does to me.

And so, I wonder if it is only and simply about justice. Certainly our sins against God are great. We offend his sense of justice and reject his love in a myriad small ways every day, often without even noticing. If we forgave every sin ever committed against us, we would still be only amateurs in forgiveness. We would still be a long, long way from forgiving at the depth and with the grace that God offers to us.

I wonder if we misunderstand what is meant by this phrase. Perhaps this is descriptive and not prescriptive. Not, I won't forgive you if you don't forgive others but rather, if you don't forgive others how can I forgive you? Perhaps there is something in an unforgiving attitude that somehow prevents us from receiving God's grace, and what Jesus is saying is not that God won't forgive, but rather God cannot forgive if we have not forgiven our brother or sister. If I am angry with someone, will that anger not cloud my relationship with God too? Will it not be there when I read the bible, when I pray, when I worship? It will certainly wreck my peace, and my peace of mind.

So perhaps it is not just about justice, about God treating us as we treat others, but also about our ability to see where we go wrong and accept forgiveness. After all, if we are so busy rehearsing the wrongs others have done to us, we will struggle to see the ways in

which we have done wrong. I often think of Burn's poem, which I quoted recently "Wad some power the giftie gie us to see oorsels as ithers see us". We might learn a lot about the ways in which we sin against God and our fellow human beings if we could see ourselves objectively. And then we might realise the extent to which we need God's forgiveness, and then we might be less preoccupied with our anger against those who have hurt us, and more preoccupied with trying to get our relationship with God right.

Perhaps we need to ask God to help us see where we are going wrong, to help us identify our sins. And I am sure that we need to ask for his help to forgive others because it is hard, it is very hard, and sometimes it seems impossible. Just to be clear, I am not underestimating the extent to which we can suffer because of someone else's behaviour. I do not mean this to sound glib, or easy, or simple. It is not. But I do think that if we can find it within ourselves to forgive those who have hurt us, we will be more open to receive the grace that God offers us.

I think, though, that the last word has to be a word of comfort and of consolation. It's hard to forgive. Many of us carry deep wounds as a result of the actions of others. And please hear this ... God knows that. He knows how much we hurt and he knows how difficult it is to forgive that hurt. It might take a long time to get there. We might ask God for miracles, but I don't think he expects miracles from us. Some things are not easily forgiven. We can only do it with his help. But he will help us, if we want him to, if we ask him to and if we are honest with him about how we feel and how difficult we find it. And if we continue to be honest with him, because forgiveness is not a one time thing. We have to keep going back and trying to forgive again and again and again. Although I think that it probably gets easier with practice.

"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." What is God asking of us here? I think it's this. Let's be honest about our own shortcomings and sins, and let's remember the great debt that we owe God, who does not hold us to account for the hurt that we inflict, sometimes all unknowing, on others and on him. Let us strive to forgive others, that we might in turn be open to the forgiveness that God offers us. Perhaps then we can pray the Lord's Prayer, and that most telling of phrases, forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors, Sunday by Sunday, with peace in our hearts rather than fear on our minds.

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